

*Guardians  
of the*  
Fairy Tale

*The Brothers  
Grimm*

*In the early 1800s brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published a book of fairy tales, largely gathered from storytellers in central Germany. Echoes of the world-famous tales still resound, from castles to deep, dark forests.*

BY THOMAS O'NEILL  
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY GERD LUDWIG

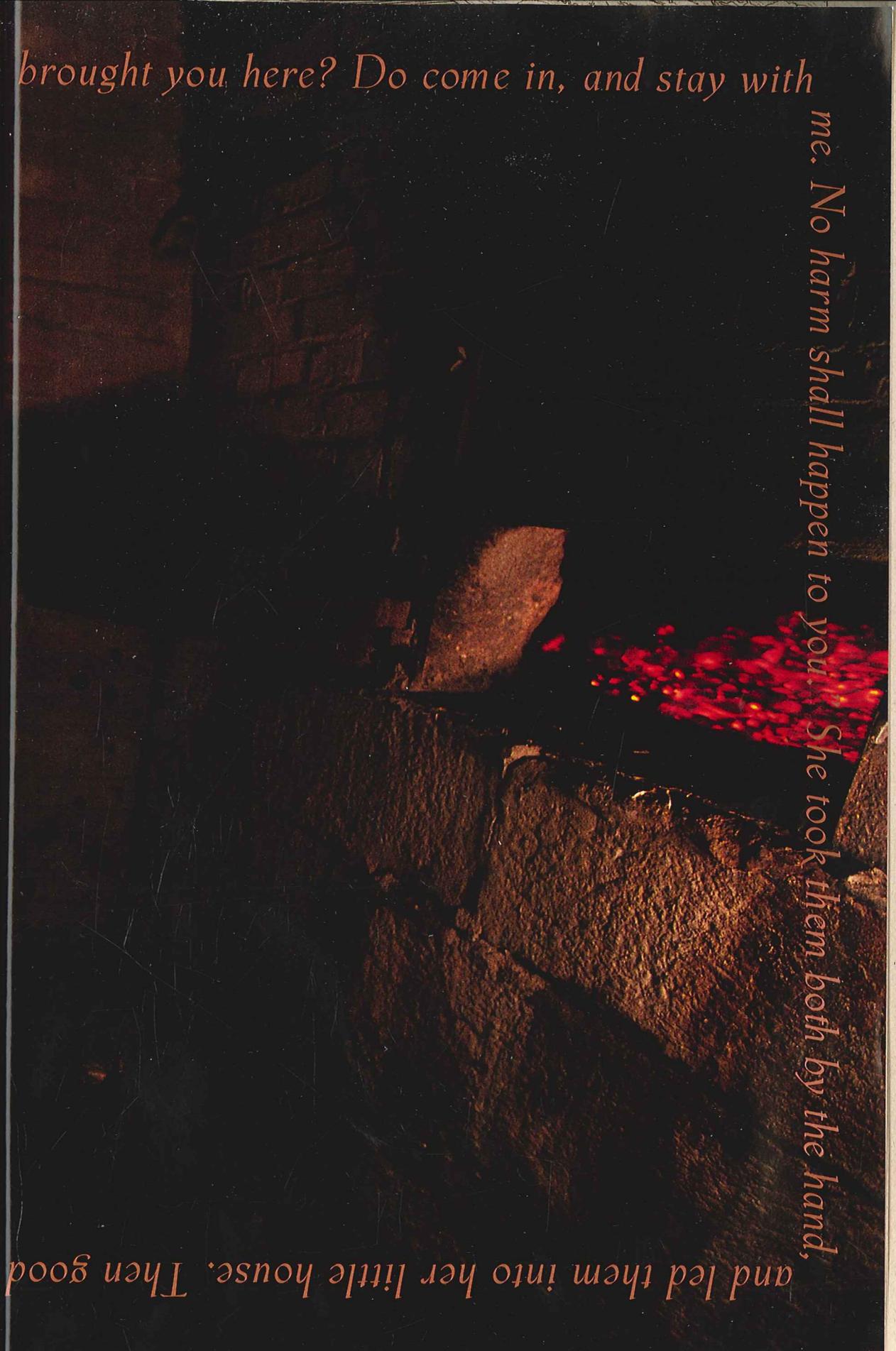
*"Oh, you dear children, who has brought you here? Do come in, and stay with*



*with sugar..... —HÄNSEL AND GRETEL*

*and led them into her little house. Then good food was set before them, milk and pancakes,*

*me. No harm shall happen to you. She took them both by the hand,*



into the forest; I will no longer have her in my sight." —LITTLE SNOW-WHITE

And envy and pride grew higher and higher in

her heart like a weed, so that she had no peace day or night. She called

a huntsman, and said: "Take the child away



nce upon a time there lived in Germany two brothers who loved a good story—one with magic and danger, royalty and rogues. As boys they played and studied together, tight as a knot,

savoring their childhood in a small town. But their father died unexpectedly, and the family grew poor. One brother became sickly; the other, serious beyond his years. At school they met a wise man who led them to a treasure—a library of old books with tales more seductive than any they had ever heard. Inspired, the brothers began collecting their own stories, folktales told to them mostly by women, young and old. Soon the brothers brought forth their own treasure—a book of fairy tales that would enchant millions in far-away places for generations to come.

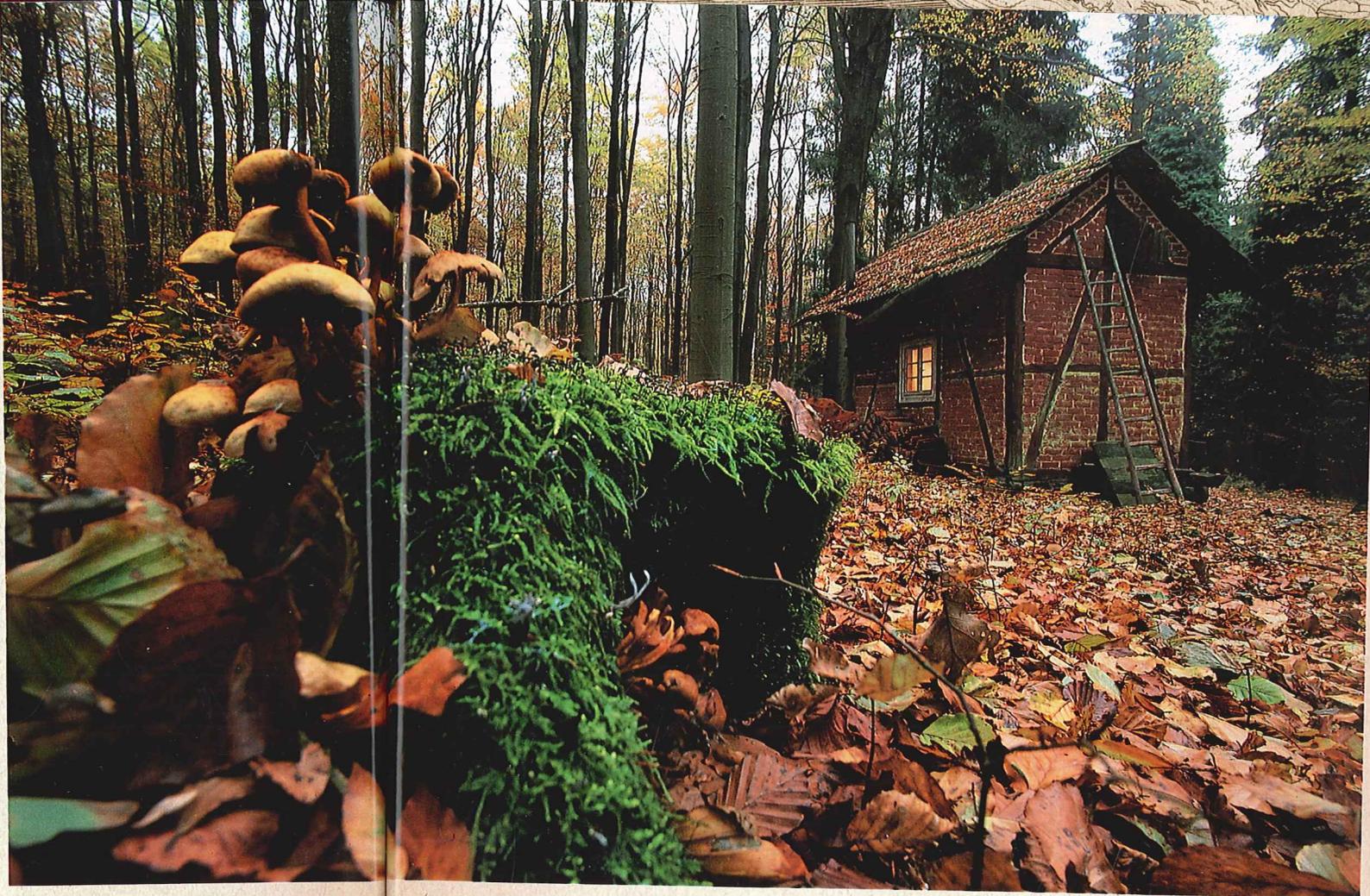
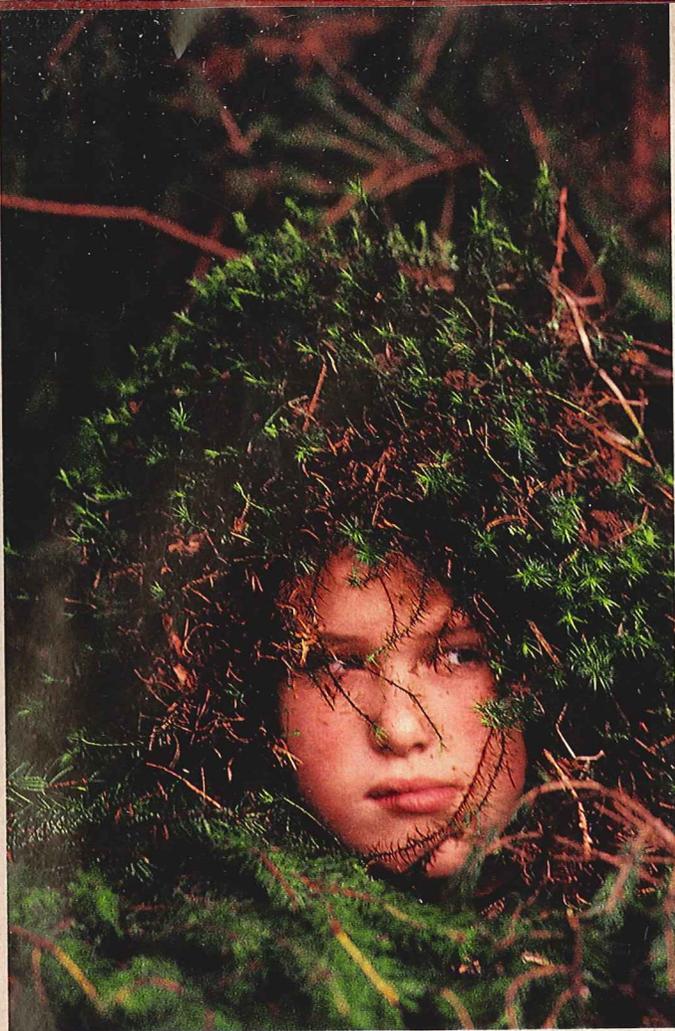
The Brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, named their story collection *Children's and Household Tales* and published the first of its seven editions in Germany in 1812. The table of contents reads like an A-list of fairy-tale celebrities: Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel, Rumpelstiltskin, Hansel and Gretel, the Frog King. Dozens of other characters—a carousel of witches, servant girls, soldiers, stepmothers, dwarfs, giants, wolves, devils—spin through the pages. Drawn mostly from oral narratives, the 210 stories in the Grimms' collection represent an anthology of fairy tales, animal fables, rustic farces, and religious allegories that remains unrivaled to this day.

*Grimms' Fairy Tales*, as the English-language version is usually called, pervades world culture. So far the

collection has been translated into more than 160 languages, from Inupiat in the Arctic to Swahili in Africa. In the United States book buyers have their choice of 120 editions. As a publishing phenomenon the Grimms' opus competes with the Bible. And the stories and their star characters continue to leap from the pages into virtually every media: theater, opera, comic books, movies, paintings, rock music, advertising, fashion. The Japanese, perhaps the most ravenous of all the Grimms' fans, have built two theme parks devoted to the tales. In the United States the Grimms' collection furnished much of the raw material that helped launch Disney as a media giant. Cinderella and Snow White easily hold their own with the new kids on the block, whether Big Bird or Bart Simpson.

As for the brothers, they are recognized as pioneers in the field of folklore research. Their crystalline fairy-tale style—the Grimms extensively edited and rewrote drafts of the narratives—has influenced generations of children's writers and paved the way for other masters of the genre, from Hans Christian Andersen to Maurice Sendak. But the Grimms' stories do not speak only to the young. "The age for hearing these fairy tales is three years to death," says Elfriede Kleinhaus, a professional storyteller in Germany. "Our world can seem so technical and cold. All of us need these stories to warm our souls."

*A player in Kassel's pre-Lenten festivities waits for a mirror to declare her fairest in the land. Preceding pages: A villager peers into the fiery mouth of the communal oven in Röllshausen.*



“As I have lost my way in the forest I should like to stay here over night.” — THE DEVIL WITH THE THREE GOLDEN HAIRS

SUCH LASTING FAME would have shocked the humble Grimms. During their lifetimes the collection sold modestly in Germany, at first only a few hundred copies a year. The early editions were not even aimed at children. The brothers initially refused to consider illustrations, and scholarly footnotes took up almost as much space as the tales themselves.

Jacob and Wilhelm viewed themselves as patriotic folklorists, not as entertainers of children. They began their work at a time when Germany, a messy patchwork of fiefdoms and principalities, had been overrun by the French under Napoleon. The new rulers were

Photographer GERD LUDWIG grew up in Germany's Hesse region, home of the Brothers Grimm.

Quotations from *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales* by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, translated by Margaret Hunt and James Stern. © 1944 Pantheon Books, Inc., renewed 1972 by Random House, Inc.

intent on suppressing local culture. As young, workaholic scholars, single and sharing a cramped flat, the Brothers Grimm undertook the fairy-tale collection with the goal of saving the endangered oral tradition of Germany.

For much of the 19th century teachers, parents, and religious figures, particularly in the United States, deplored the Grimms' collection for its raw, uncivilized content. An American educator in 1885 railed: “The folktales mirror all too loyally the entire medieval worldview and culture with all its stark prejudice, its crudeness and barbarities.” Offended adults objected to the gruesome punishments inflicted on the stories' villains. In the original “Snow White” the evil stepmother is forced to dance in red-hot iron shoes until she falls down dead. In “The Goose Maid” a treacherous servant is stripped, thrown into a barrel studded with sharp nails, and dragged through the streets.

Even today some protective parents shy from the Grimms' tales because of their reputation for violence.

Despite its sometimes rocky reception, *Children's and Household Tales* gradually took root with the public. The brothers had not foreseen that the appearance of their work would coincide with a great flowering of children's literature in Europe. English publishers led the way, issuing high-quality picture books such as *Jack and the Beanstalk* and handsome folk-tale collections, all to satisfy a newly literate audience seeking virtuous material for the nursery. Once the Brothers Grimm sighted this new public, they set about refining and softening their tales, which had originated centuries earlier as earthy peasant fare. In the Grimms' hands, cruel mothers became nasty

*Friend or foe? Fairy-tale heroes were never sure which awaited them when they spied a light in the woods, like one from a lonely cabin in the Reinhardswald. Beneath the moss may hide a gnome—or a boy keeping dry.*

stepmothers, unmarried lovers were made chaste, and the incestuous father was recast as the devil.

In the 20th century the Grimms' fairy tales have come to rule the bookshelves of children's bedrooms. And why not? The stories read like dreams come true: Handsome lads and beautiful damsels, armed with magic, triumph over giants and witches and wild beasts. They outwit mean, selfish adults. Inevitably the

boy and girl fall in love and live happily ever after. *Read me another one, please.*

And parents keep reading because they approve of the finger-wagging lessons inserted into the stories: Keep your promises, don't talk to strangers, work hard, obey your parents. According to the Grimms, the collection served as “a manual of manners.”



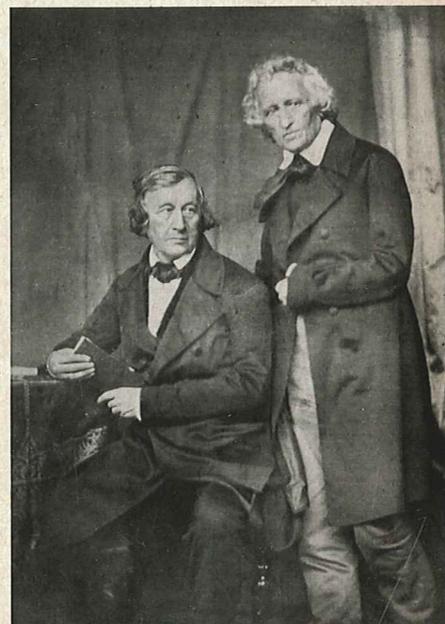
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BOTH FROM THE MUSEUM OF THE BROTHERS GRIMM, KASSEL

## A Family Tale

Serious scholars of medieval literature, the Brothers Grimm began collecting fairy tales as a favor for a friend. Indignant at French rule in their home region of Hesse, the brothers saw in tales like “Hansel and Gretel” and “Rumpelstiltskin” a way to save German culture.

Subjects of an early daguerreotype in 1847, Jacob, standing,



and Wilhelm produced seven editions of *Children's and Household Tales*, the first in 1812. For illustrations they employed their brother Ludwig, who also drew fantasy figures for the family children (above).

Many of the 210 stories began life as adult tales in medieval Europe. The brothers recast the narratives in simple, evocative prose, creating classics read today in over 160 languages.



“What a tender young creature! what a nice plump mouthful— she will be better to eat than the old woman.” — LITTLE RED-CAP

Americans fell in love with the Grimms' tales when Walt Disney in 1937 released his animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the first of three wildly popular Disney adaptations. In converting a short story into an 80-minute musical, the Disney studio sweetened the material, giving the dwarfs names like Sneezy and Happy. In *Cinderella* (1950) Disney frosted the plot by adding a carriage that turns into a pumpkin at the stroke of midnight.

THE GRIMMS' TEXTS have undergone so many adaptations and translations, often with the intent of censoring objectionable material such as the violence meted out to villains or of making the themes more relevant to contemporary tastes, that most of us know them only in their sanitized versions. The dust-jacket copy of

a recent translation plaintively wonders if all the retellings don't "greatly reduce the tales' power to touch our emotions and intrigue our imaginations."

In a fourth-grade classroom in Steinau, Germany, the town where the Grimms spent part of their childhood, I listened as the storyteller Elfriede Kleinahns, an opponent of prim retellings, asked the boys and girls how the princess managed to turn a frog into a prince at the climax of the "The Frog King," the first tale in the Grimms' collection. "She kissed it," the children sang out. "No," said Kleinahns. "She threw the ugly frog at the wall as hard as she could, and it awoke as a prince. That's what the real story says." The children looked as if they didn't believe her.

Scholars and psychiatrists have thrown a

camouflaging net over the stories with their relentless, albeit fascinating, question of "What does it mean?" Did the tossing of the frog symbolize the princess's sexual awakening, as Freudian psychologist Bruno Bettelheim asserted, or does the princess provide a feminist role model, as Lutz Röhrich, a German folklorist, wondered, by defying the patriarchal authority of her father, the king? Or—maybe—a frog is just a frog.

The tales have also fallen prey to ideologues and propagandists. Theorists of the Third Reich in Germany turned Little Red Riding Hood into a symbol of the German people, saved from the evil Jewish wolf. At the end of World War II, Allied commanders banned the publication of the Grimm tales in Germany in

*Costumed in the old ways of the Schwalm area, a girl plays as Little Red Riding Hood, heedless of danger.*

the belief that they had contributed to Nazi savagery.

On campuses across Europe and the United States during the 1970s, the Grimms' tales were scorned for promoting a sexist, authority-ridden worldview. "Madness Comes From

Fairy Tales" was scrawled on walls in Germany. Some of the stories were rewritten to accommodate certain political tastes. A revision of "Cinderella," for example, has the heroine organizing a union of local maids, prompting the king to arrest her, after which she emigrates to the U.S. to escape the tyranny of kings and queens.

Asked about this landslide of commentary by shrinks and scholars and ideologues, Bernhard Lauer, director and curator of the Museum of the Brothers Grimm in Kassel, Germany, looked sadly at me and protested, "The tales are literary masterpieces! They are not recipes for everyday life."

ENTHRALLED SINCE CHILDHOOD by the geography of the Grimms' tales—the ominous forests, the brooding castles, the firelit cottages and clamorous village streets—I traveled to Germany to see if I could trace the contours of my imaginary map and possibly discover who these Brothers Grimm really were and how they became the preeminent cartographers of make-believe. My plan was to visit towns in Hesse where the brothers lived and worked to find out who told them the stories and how much the Grimms doctored what they heard. And I would roam the back roads to see if landscapes evoked by the fairy tales still lingered in the Hessian countryside.

Snow streaked the ground in brushstrokes as I drove east from Frankfurt and its glass skyscrapers into Grimm country. Except for their final years in Berlin, Jacob and Wilhelm spent most of their lives in the small towns and provincial cities of today's state of Hesse in the German midsection, close to what—once upon a time—was the border with East Germany. Except for the autobahn's ribbon of concrete and roadside clusters of metal silos, the Hessian countryside today might look remarkably familiar to the Grimms. Red-roofed villages nestle in the folds of hills and along river

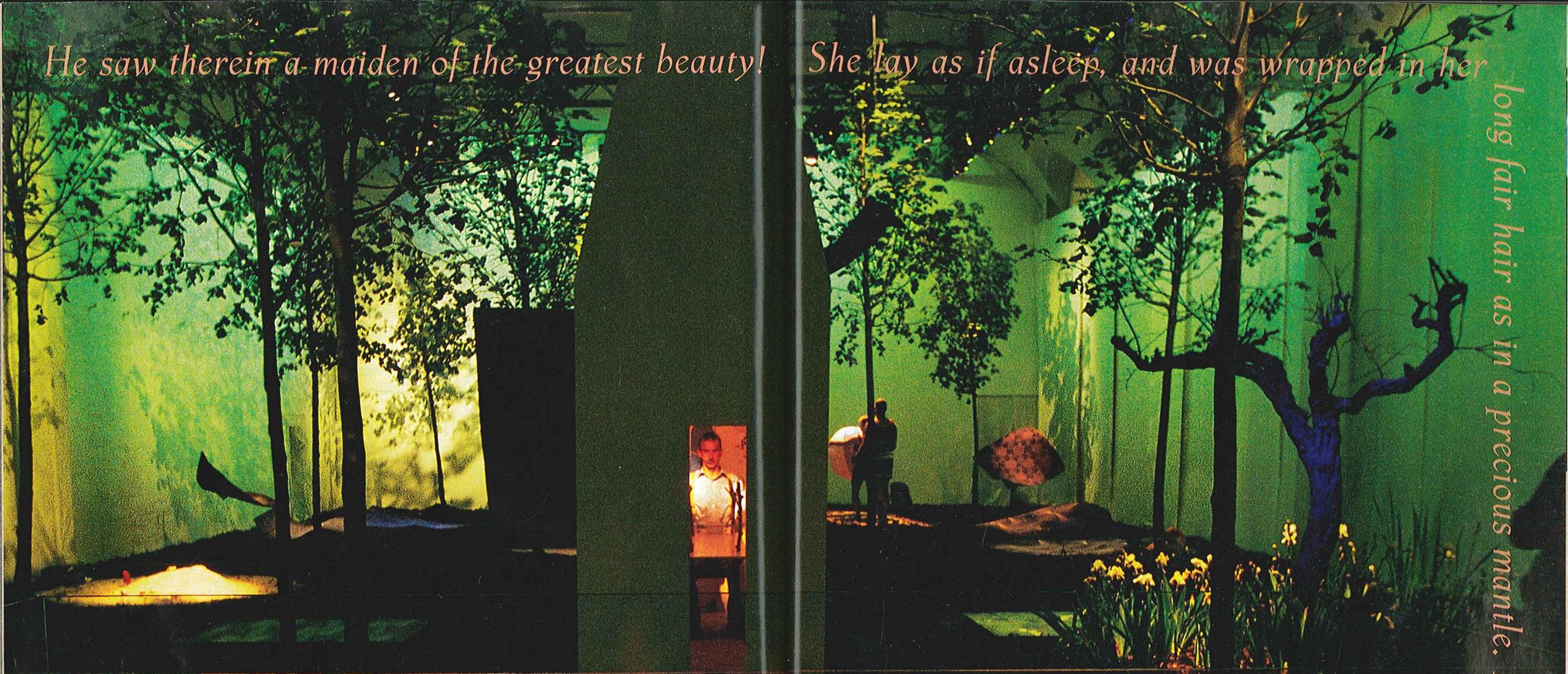


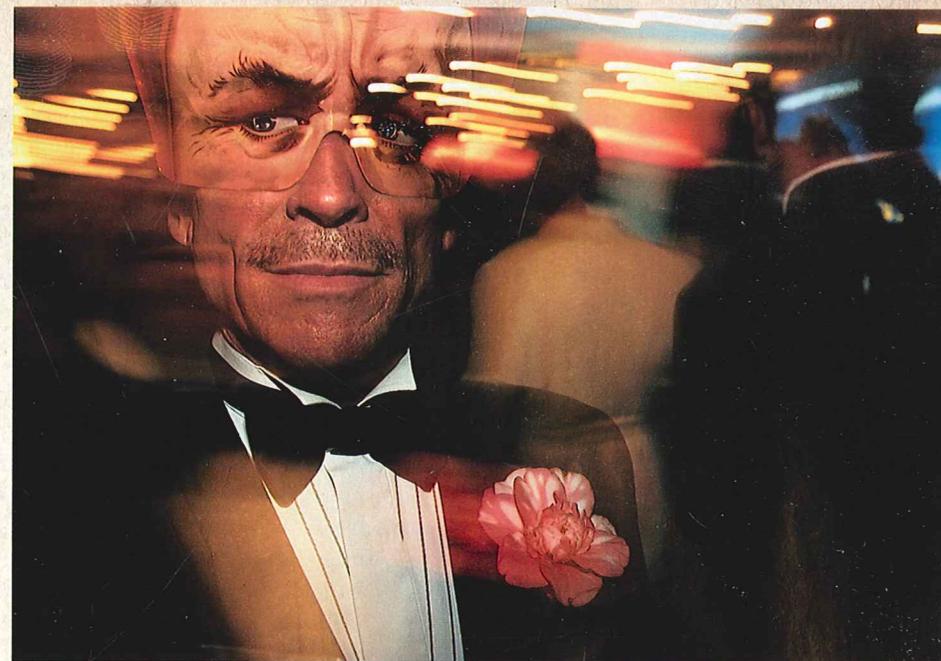
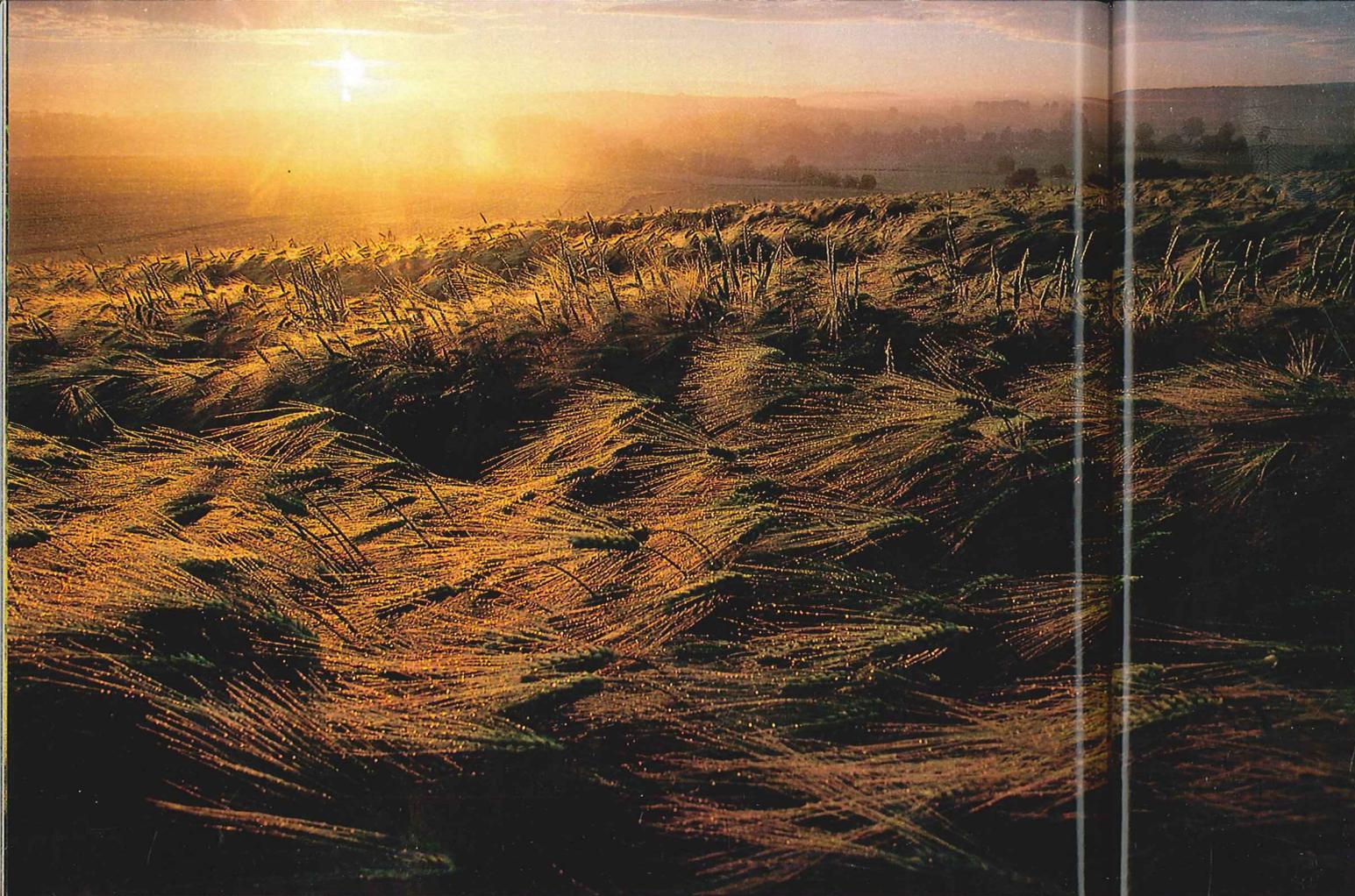
*He saw therein a maiden of the greatest beauty! She lay as if asleep, and was wrapped in her*

*long fair hair as in a precious mantle. Her eyes were closely shut,*

*but the brightness of her complexion...left no*

*doubt that she was alive. —THE GLASS COFFIN*





**“If by to-morrow morning early you  
have not spun this straw into  
gold during the night, you must die.”**

—RUMPELSTILTSKIN

valleys. Stone castles rise from nearby heights, sprouting towers and battlements. Fields that will later ripen with corn and beets roll toward thick forests that frame the horizon like the borders of a woodcut.

The oldest of six children, Jacob and Wilhelm were born a year apart in the mid-1780s in Hanau, a market town less than a day's carriage ride from Frankfurt. Their father, Philipp, the son of a clergyman, was educated in law and served as Hanau's town clerk, a solid middle-class vocation. Father Grimm preached a life of faith, zealous work, and family loyalty. Their mother, Dorothea, gave the boys freedom to wander the countryside where, as Wilhelm later noted, their “collector's spirit” was born as they chased down butterflies and bugs.

Nothing remains of the Grimms' birthplace in Hanau. Like most of the houses they occupied, it was destroyed by aerial bombing during World War II. A bronze statue of the brothers sits in front of the *Rathaus*, or city

hall. It features two long-haired men in frock coats absorbed in reading a book, their greatest joy. Tourists regularly gather at its base, their own noses stuck in books, usually travel guides. The statue marks the beginning of the Deutsche Märchenstrasse, or German Fairy-tale Road, a 370-mile route that meanders through central Germany to sites associated with the Grimms or to picturesque places that simply put the traveler in a fairy-tale mood.

By 1791 the family had moved northeast to Steinau, another small trade center, where the father took the position of district magistrate. The Grimms lived well in a large turreted stone house that doubled as the local courthouse. It survives today as a museum of Grimm manuscripts and memorabilia, with revolving exhibits of contemporary fairy-tale illustrators.

At the center of Steinau stands a gaunt 16th-century castle ringed by a grassy moat. Wandering one night through the tiny town, the kind of quiet, uneventful town “where the fox

and hare say good night to each other,” as the Germans say, I entered the moon-shadowed courtyard of the castle and listened to my boots ringing on the cobblestones. In so many of the Grimms' tales an aspiring commoner is ushered into just such a royal space, challenged to make a princess laugh or to bring back three golden hairs from the devil's head. Success meant riches

and a royal bride. When the Grimms wrote of castles in their tales, perhaps they remembered this boyhood place.

The Steinau years marked the end of ease and innocence for Jacob and Wilhelm. In 1796 their father died at the age of 44. Dorothea was forced to move her family of six children out of the government residence.

With financial help from Dorothea's sister, a lady-in-waiting for a Hessian princess, Jacob and Wilhelm, at 13 and 12, were sent north

*The alchemy of dawn turns barley into gold. At a masked ball in Frankfurt, a guest looks for his Cinderella. Preceding pages: Sleeping Beauty awaits a prince's kiss in an art show.*

to the city of Kassel to attend the Lyzeum, an upper-crust high school. Sharing the same room and bed, the boys coped with loneliness and social slights by studying for ten hours a day. They proved themselves brilliant students, graduating at the top of their classes. The physical effort took its toll on Wilhelm, however. Already of delicate health, he suffered a serious asthma attack at school. Weak lungs and recurring illnesses would vex him the rest of his life.

Like fairy-tale heroes, the Grimm brothers were tested with hard luck and formidable obstacles before it was time for them to meet the wise man who would lead them out of the dark. The meeting took place in the university city of Marburg where Jacob in 1802 and Wilhelm a year later pursued degrees in law. To pick up their trail, I enlisted the help of Rotraut Fischer, a scholar of the German Romantic

No one heard this because of the noise of the chopping-knife. Now poor Thumbling was in trouble.... — THUMBLING'S TRAVELS

movement. Cloaked in black wool and hoisting a book bag over her shoulder, Fischer led me along steep narrow streets crowded with students. We turned onto Barfüsser Street, passing the half-timbered building where the brothers roomed as poor law students, and started to climb toward the heights of Marburg.

"We know from his letters that Jacob walked this route many times," Fischer said. "In one he complained that there are more steps on the streets than stairs in the houses." We continued past a spiky Gothic church, an organ booming inside, to a three-story stone house just below the town castle. It was here that a young aristocratic law professor, Friedrich Carl von Savigny, impressed by Jacob's appetite for learning, opened his private library to the older Grimm brother. That changed Jacob's life. He spent hours poring over Savigny's collection of rare manuscripts of medieval epics and hero's tales. The experience awoke in Jacob a passion for deciphering and saving ancient German literature and folktales, a cause that his younger brother would also embrace.

Jacob did not look and act the part of a fiery activist. Short and sturdy, he was by temperament an introvert, his whole being dedicated to bookish research. At Marburg he would decline invitations to stroll the countryside, saying he preferred "a walk in literature." Fellow students called him "the old one." Wilhelm, a determined scholar like his brother, was more outgoing. "Wilhelm had an eye for women, and women had an eye for him," Heinz Rölleke, a Grimm scholar at the University of Wuppertal, told me. Fervent letters passed between Wilhelm and Jenny von Droste-Hülshoff, a wealthy young woman whom he met in a storytelling circle.

Class differences foiled any chance of marriage. Wilhelm at the age of 39 would marry a childhood friend, Dortchen Wild, daughter of a pharmacist and herself a prominent source of fairy tales for the collection. Jacob, a lifelong bachelor, was by far the dominant partner intellectually, initiating most of their projects. Yet the brothers worked well together, signing their joint undertakings simply "Brothers Grimm."

*Curiosity and fear  
duel in a child's  
expression as a  
butcher slices a pig in  
half in a farmyard  
near Alsfeld.*

CHILDREN'S AND HOUSEHOLD TALES, their great collaboration, began in an almost offhand fashion. Immersed in editing and translating medieval manuscripts, the brothers started to gather fairy tales as a favor for a friend planning a collection of German folk literature. After several years the Grimms had assembled 49 tales, taking a few from old books, the rest from acquaintances in Kassel. But when the friend failed to produce the collection, the brothers decided to expand their efforts and publish their own volume.

Collecting fairy tales must have provided Jacob and Wilhelm a welcome distraction from their living circumstances. Their mother had died in 1808. Money grew scarcer. Employed as a librarian for the detested resident French

ruler, Jacob could barely support his five siblings. Wilhelm was sick from asthma and a weak heart and was unable to work. In 1812, the year the fairy tales were first published, the Grimms were surviving on a single meal a day—a hardship that could explain why so many of the characters in their book suffer from hunger.

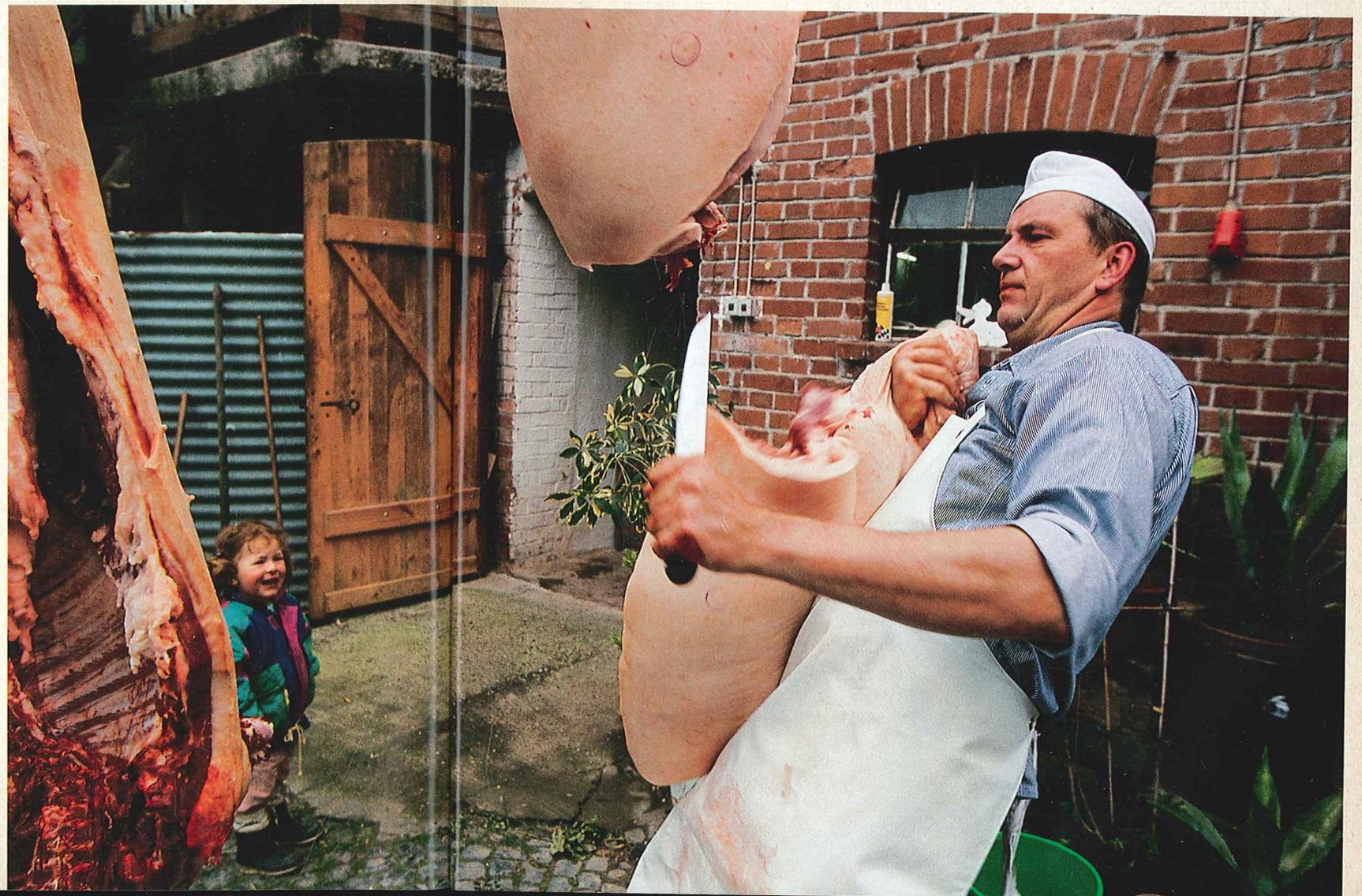
Though new editions of the fairy tales continued to appear until 1857, two years before Wilhelm's death, collection of almost all the oral tales took place when the brothers were in their impressionable 20s.

Altogether some 40 persons delivered tales to the Grimms. Many of the storytellers came to the Grimms' house in Kassel. The brothers particularly welcomed the visits of Dorothea Viehmann, a widow who walked to town to

sell produce from her garden. An innkeeper's daughter, Viehmann had grown up listening to stories from travelers on the road to Frankfurt. Among her treasures was "Aschenputtel"—Cinderella.

With the exception of Viehmann, the brothers rarely identified their correspondents. Their names and the tales credited to them were learned in most cases only after careful study of the margin notes in the brothers' personal copies of the *Tales*.

The true identity of one of the most important informants—a certain "Marie"—came to light only in the mid-1970s. Marie was credited in the notes with narrating many of the most famous tales: "Rotkäppchen" (Little Red Riding Hood), "Schneewittchen" (Snow White), and "Dornröschen" (Sleeping Beauty).

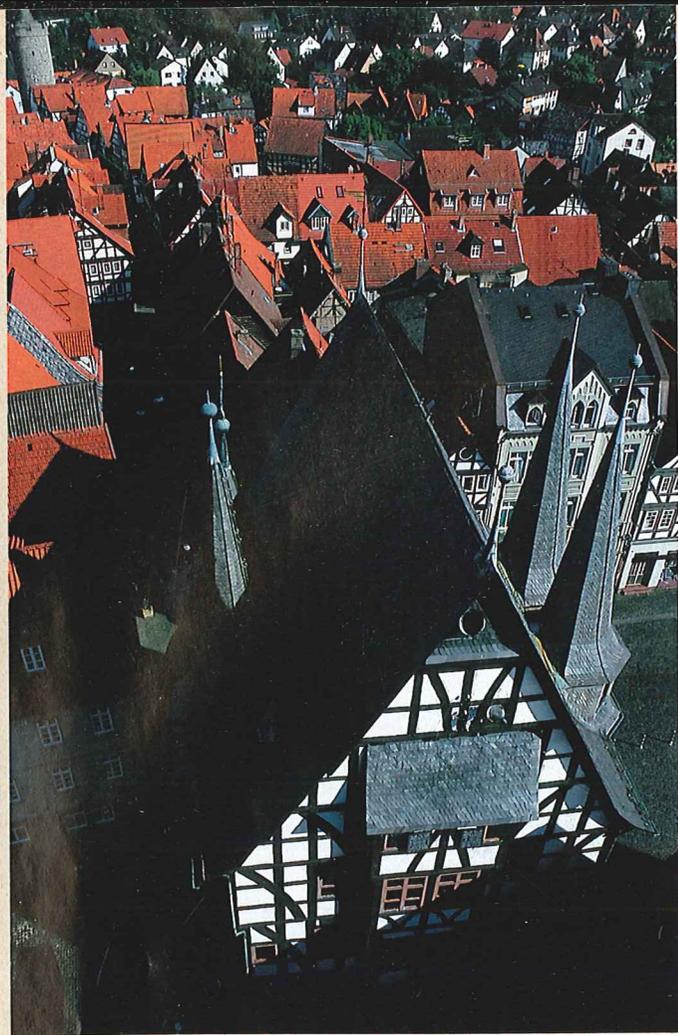


*In a moment, numbers of little earth-men came forth, and asked what the*

*King's daughter commanded. Then said she: "In three hours' time the*

*great forest must be cut down, and all the wood laid in heaps."* —THE TWO KINGS' CHILDREN





Then he came to a house which seemed very small, for in front of it a great giant was standing. — THE RAVEN

Herman Grimm, the oldest son of Wilhelm and guardian of the Grimms' legacy after the brothers' deaths, contended for many years that the Marie in question was the old housekeeper of Wilhelm's in-laws.

It took a close reading of the annotations by Heinz Rölleke of the University of Wuppertal to reveal that the storytelling Marie was in fact Marie Hassenpflug, a 20-year-old friend of their sister, Charlotte, from a well-bred, French-speaking family.

I ENCOUNTERED A LIKENESS of Marie on a wall in Wolfgang Hassenpflug's house in Rinteln. Herr Hassenpflug, a retired engineer with a poet's head of unruly white hair, is the great-great-grandson of Charlotte Grimm, known as Lotte in family circles. In 1822, he explained, 29-year-old Lotte left the household of her five brothers and married a longtime family friend,

Ludwig Hassenpflug, a brother of Marie. Because the direct lines of Jacob and Wilhelm appear to have died out with the death of Wilhelm's daughter in 1919, Wolfgang Hassenpflug now finds himself the inheritor of many Grimm family treasures, as well as mementos from the Hassenpflug lineage.

The walls of Hassenpflug's elegant stone house are hung with original portraits of the Grimm brothers and of their sister and her family—copperplate prints all etched by a third brother Grimm, Ludwig. Marie looks out with large soulful eyes, her thin face framed by dark curls.

For my visit Hassenpflug's wife, Gerda, dressed a table for lunch with one of Lotte's original damask tablecloths, with "LG" stitched in one corner. Wolfgang told the story of Marie's "rediscovery" and explained how the family's French-Huguenot background

influenced her storytelling ability. "Like the Grimms she grew up in Hanau, which at the time was a very French town," Hassenpflug said. "Her nursemaids naturally told French stories. The Grimms may at first have thought Marie's tales all came from Hesse, but the famous ones we now know came from France and the book by Charles Perrault."

Marie's wonderful stories blended motifs from the oral tradition and from Perrault's influential 1697 book, *Tales of My Mother Goose*, which contained elaborate versions of "Little Red Riding Hood," "Snow White," and "Sleeping Beauty," among others. Many of these had been adapted from earlier Italian fairy tales. In the second edition of their own collection the Grimms acknowledged the

*A steadfast knight in Trendelburg shows how to defeat witches and dragons. Old half-timbered buildings cluster in Alsfeld. Preceding pages: Industrious as fairy-tale dwarfs, schoolchildren clear a wet forest trail.*

deep international roots of many of their tales. Included in their notes are references to variants from many other cultures, including Russian, Finnish, Japanese, Irish, and Slavic.

Long before the Grimms' time, storytelling thrived in the milieu of roadhouses, barns, and, perhaps most energetically, in the *Spinnstuben*, the spinning chambers of peasant women. During winter nights women softened the long hours of spinning

flax into yarn by entertaining themselves with tales spiced with adventure, romance, and magic. The Grimm tales feature many spinners, most famously in "Rumpelstiltskin," in which a poor miller's daughter, ordered by a king to spin straw into gold—failure means death, success a royal marriage—enlists the aid of a devilish little man, Rumpelstiltskin.

*From that time forth, no one would any longer venture into the forest,*

*and it lay there in deep stillness and solitude, and nothing was seen*

*of it, but sometimes an eagle or a hawk flying*

*over it. This lasted for many years....*

—IRON HANS



The smell of the delicious dishes which were being taken in and out reached her, and now and then the servants threw her a few morsels....

— KING THRUSHBEARD

GIVEN THAT THE ORIGINS of many of the Grimm fairy tales reach throughout Europe and into the Middle East and Orient, the question must be asked: How German are the Grimm tales? Very, says scholar Heinz Rölleke. Love of the underdog, rustic simplicity, sexual modesty—these are Teutonic traits.

The coarse texture of life during medieval times in Germany, when many of the tales entered the oral tradition, also colored the narratives. Throughout Europe children were often neglected and abandoned, like Hansel and Gretel. Accused witches were burned at the stake, like the evil mother-in-law in "The Six Swans." "The cruelty in the stories was not the Grimms' fantasy," Rölleke points out. "It reflected the law-and-order system of the old times."

*Patrons feast at a medieval banquet in Wetterburg Castle. Avoiding the poison red ones, foragers pick wild mushrooms. Preceding pages: An ancient beech haunts a gloomy forest.*

Possibly the most German touch of all is the omnipresence of the forest, the place where fairy-tale heroes confront their enemies and triumph over fear and injustice. Rural German society traditionally depended on the *Wald*. The forest was where farmers grazed their pigs on acorns, royals hunted deer, and woodcutters selected logs for the massive beams still seen in the half-timbered barns and houses of Hessian towns. Storytellers knew that to place characters in a dark trackless woods would stir up associations of danger and suspense. "The forest was not seen as a safe place. Townspeople would avoid it," forester Hermann-Josef Rapp told me as we drove wet logging roads through the Reinhardswald, a large forest in the hills of northern Hesse. "There were outlaws and



illegal hunters. And Germans have always been afraid of wolves."

Nowadays the Reinhardswald is thick with beech and introduced spruce, serving local sawmills. But to behold those mighty oaks that were the preferred species in most Grimm fairy tales, one has to visit a remnant forest near Sababurg Castle. Rapp, a trunk of a man in a green oilskin jacket, led me into that forest one day in a pouring rain. Here massive, arthritic-looking oaks, some of them 400 years old or more, loomed like Gothic ruins. I spooked myself staring at the thick, grasping limbs, the wild hairlike mosses, the knobby eyes, the holes that gaped like mouths. How could Little Red Riding Hood's mother ever have let that sweet little girl go into such woods as these?

Despite the strong Germanic flavoring of the tales, the first edition sold poorly. At the

Grimms museum in Kassel, director Bernhard Lauer placed the brothers' personal copy of the first edition in front of me, handling it as if it were a Fabergé egg. "It's the most valuable thing in the museum," he said, "Only a few of the original 900 copies still exist. The paper quality was very poor."

Mild commercial success did not come until 1825, when the Grimms published the *Small Edition*, a condensed collection of 50 stories with illustrations by their brother Ludwig. The 1825 volume, of which 1,500 copies were printed, is even rarer than the 1812; only four or five copies survive in libraries. With the debut of the cheaply priced *Small Edition*, the Grimms had at last figured out who their true audience was: children.

By the second edition in 1819 Wilhelm had taken over the lead responsibility for the fairy tales, Jacob having turned his attentions to

But round about the castle there began to grow a hedge of thorns, which every year became higher.... — LITTLE BRIAR-ROSE

a scholarly exegesis on German grammar. Wilhelm proved an inspired editor. By streamlining plots to emphasize action, weaving into the narrative old proverbs and folk poems, and using poetic language to set scenes, Wilhelm created a style that remains a model for fairy-tale writing.

Wilhelm continued to polish and reshape the tales up to the final edition of 1857. Comparisons of the various editions reveal that in his effort to make the stories more acceptable to children and their middle-class parents, Wilhelm removed any hint of sexual activity, such as the premarital couplings of Rapunzel and the prince who climbed into her tower. He also added Christian motifs, accented the child-rearing lessons of the tales, and emphasized gender roles. Though the brothers implied that they were mere recorders of tales, such literary and moral restylings of oral narratives were apparently crucial to bring the tales into the mainstream. "Yet despite all Wilhelm's additions," Röller said, "the cores of the stories were left untouched."

The editorial fingerprints left by the Grimms betray the specific values of 19th-century Christian, bourgeois German society. But that has not stopped the tales from being embraced by almost every culture and nationality in the world. What accounts for this widespread, enduring popularity? Bernhard Lauer points to the "universal style" of the writing. "You have no concrete descriptions of the land, or the clothes, or the forest, or the castles. It makes the stories timeless and placeless."

The tales allow us to express "our utopian longings," says Jack Zipes of the University of Minnesota, whose 1987 translation of the complete fairy tales captures the rustic vigor of the original text. "They show a striving for happiness that none of us knows but that we sense is possible. We can identify with the heroes of the tales and become in our mind the masters and mistresses of our own destinies."

Fairy tales provide a workout for the unconscious, psychoanalysts maintain. Bruno Bettelheim famously promoted the therapeutic value of the Grimms' stories, calling fairy tales the "great comforters." By confronting fears and phobias, symbolized by witches, heartless

*Abandoned for a hundred years, Sababurg Castle has awakened as a hotel fit for make-believe.*

stepmothers, and hungry wolves, children find they can master their anxieties. Bettelheim's theory continues to be hotly debated. But most young readers aren't interested in exercising their unconscious. My 11-year-old daughter, Lucy, thinks it's

cool that witches cast spells and that heroines always seem to get their man. Boys I know go for stuff like the cloak that makes a hero invisible and a rifle that never misses.

The Grimm tales in fact please in an infinite number of ways. Something about them seems to mirror whatever moods or interests we bring to our reading of them. This flexibility of interpretation suits them for almost any time and any culture.

Jacob and Wilhelm moved on from their

jobs as librarians in Kassel to teach at universities in Göttingen and Berlin. Between them they published more than 35 books. The brothers also made a name for themselves as patriots, risking their livelihoods by speaking out in favor of democratic reform. But in their last years they retreated from politics and teaching to concentrate on writing the *German Dictionary*, one of the most ambitious scholarly projects of 19th-century Europe.

The brothers did not live to finish the dictionary or to see the fulfillment of their abiding dream: the founding in 1871 of the German nation. Wilhelm died of an infection in 1859 at the age of 73. Jacob in his eulogy bestowed upon his beloved Wilhelm the name *Märchenbruder*, the "fairy-tale brother." Jacob died four years later. He had just finished writing

the dictionary definition for *Frucht*, or fruit, a fitting end to a fertile life.

The Brothers Grimm, for the final fairy tale in their collection, chose a short, parable-like tale called "The Golden Key." A poor boy goes out into a wintry forest to collect wood on a sled. In the snow he finds a tiny key and near it an iron box. The boy inserts the key. He turns it. He lifts the lid.

That is where the story ends. For once the brothers avoid a tidy ending. Instead, they have issued a golden invitation, since accepted by countless readers, to open the brothers' books with the key of the imagination. Only then can readers discover what wonderful things await them. □

Read tales from the Brothers Grimm and more at [www.nationalgeographic.com/grimm](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/grimm).

