



## How to Be a Heroine: Or, What I've Learned from Reading Too Much

By Samantha Ellis

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With this discovery, she embarks on a retrospective look at the literary ladies—the characters and the writers—whom she has loved since childhood. From early obsessions with the March sisters to her later idolization of Sylvia Plath, Ellis evaluates how her heroines stack up today. And, just as she excavates the stories of her favorite characters, Ellis also shares a frank, often humorous account of her own life growing up in a tight-knit Iraqi Jewish community in London. Here a life-long reader explores how heroines shape all our lives.

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## How to Be a Heroine: Or, What I've Learned from Reading too Much By Samantha Ellis Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #141787 in Books
- Published on: 2015-02-03
- Released on: 2015-02-03
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .80" w x 5.20" l, .65 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 272 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“An honest and open-hearted book by someone whose life has been informed and enriched by her reading.”  
—Susan Hill, *The Times* (London)

“Not so much self-help as shelf-help, as Ellis applies fresh insights to her own life dilemmas and proffers some inspiring solutions to everyday problems. A truly brilliant read.” —*Marie Claire*

“A literary journey to self-discovery. . . . As Ellis shows in this charming, gracefully written memoir, literary heroines revealed to her new life stories, new selves and her own power to invent her life.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“The best kind of book: one that I gobbled up . . . but unable to stop reading until it was all gone. One that made me want to run to the bookshop to buy copies of novels I’ve never got round to reading and devour those, too.” —Rebecca Armstrong, *The Independent on Sunday*

“A delightful and hilarious memoir.” —*The Economist*

“A winning memoir. . . . This is a book for book lovers, who will likely come away with a fresh take on old favorites from Ellis’ endearing but exacting examinations. Although Ellis’ own story of growing up in an Iraqi-Jewish community in London and becoming a playwright is specific, her enduring love for her literary role models is universal. The book could equally be titled *How to Be a Reader*; Ellis is passionate and engaged, railing against writers who shortchange their creations and celebrating those whose characters represent their best selves. . . . This is a rousing call for women to be the heroines in their own lives, and it’s good fun, to boot.” —*Booklist* (starred review)

“[A] warm-spirited biblio-autobiography. . . . [Ellis] is endearingly open about her vulnerabilities, superstitions, love tangles and defeats and is adept at droll asides.” —*The Guardian*

“My new best friend in book form . . . like stumbling into the kitchen at a party and discovering everyone you liked in one room.” —Sam Baker, *Harper’s Bazaar*

“All the books I love, remembered.” —Nigella Lawson

“Any woman with a remotely bookish childhood will find great pleasure in *How to Be a Heroine*. . . . Like Ellis, I find it reassuring that Lizzy Bennet can admit that she was wrong about Darcy, have used Scarlett’s indomitable mantra in times of adversity, and have every sympathy with the women who keep their bank accounts separate as in *Lace*.” —Daisy Goodwin, *The Sunday Times* (London)

“Ellis is delightfully honest and warmly funny about where and how her life has gone wrong and right. By the end of this charming book, she has used female fictional characters to explore religion, love, marriage, sex, spinsterhood and work.” —*Daily Mail*

“*How to Be a Heroine* happily reminds all bookworms of years of their life spent in the company of Scarlett, Katy, Jane Eyre, the March family and all those wonderful friends that only really exist in our hearts.” —Shirley Conran, author of *Lace*

“Pithy, funny and poignant.” —*Jewish Chronicle*

“A real treat.” —*Good Housekeeping*

“[*How to Be a Heroine*] fizzles along, thanks to Ellis’s warm humour and interesting back story. . . . Plus how could we resist a book that reminisces about Judy Blume novels?” —*Glamour*

“This is quite simply a genius idea for a book. . . . A fantastically inspirational memoir that makes you want to reread far too many books.” —*The Observer*

“[A] jaunty, witty book.” —*The Daily Telegraph*

“Ellis proves funny and thoughtful, alive both to the indulgence of reading (preferably in the bath, with a glass of wine) and to her own capacity for false enchantment. Her synopses are always lively and perceptive but she’s at her best when she gets stuck in to interrogating her characters. . . . [She] not only makes you want to go and re-read your own teenage canon but to recapture that mode of absorbing novels.” —*Evening Standard*

“An honest, warm and readable book about the plots we follow in order to make sense of our lives, the selves we adopt as we grow up and the selves we shed . . . as we grow out of them. At its heart is an exploration of the way women read: diving in with abandon, losing ourselves in words, collapsing into characters, only ever half returning to real life. There are bits of us left behind in every book we have ever loved. . . . Wise, courageous and endlessly generous, Ellis is something of a heroine herself.” —*Literary Review*

“[A] warm, witty memoir. . . . [A] life-affirming feminist text, but one delivered with such dexterity and sly humour that it never feels like a polemic or a prescription, making it well worth your time.” —*The Scotsman*

“*How to Be a Heroine* is the book I feel like I’ve been waiting for since I was 16.” —Viv Groskop, *Red* magazine

#### About the Author

Samantha Ellis is a playwright and journalist. The daughter of Iraqi-Jewish refugees, she grew up thinking her family had travelled everywhere by magic carpet. From an early age she knew she didn’t want their version of a happy ending—marriage to a nice Iraqi-Jewish boy—so she read books to find out what she did want. Her plays include *Patching Havoc*, *Sugar and Snow* and *Cling To Me Like Ivy*, and she is a founding member of women’s theatre company Agent 160. She lives in London.

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*Excerpted from Chapter One*

1

#### THE LITTLE MERMAID

The summer I was four, I got lost on a beach in Italy. I wandered off from my family, and we didn’t find each other again for two whole hours. My mother says it was the worst two hours of her life. They had police helicopters out looking for me and everything. But although I knew I was lost, I wasn’t scared. It was my first time ever on my own. I walked further than I had ever walked. I made sandcastles with a small Italian boy. I went on past the tourist part of the beach, and it was just me and the sand and the sea and the sky.

Walking along the very edge of the sea, splashing through the cool water, I felt amazingly free. When I was reunited with my parents, I cried. I was glad to be safe again. But it had been an adventure. And now it was a story, with me at the centre of it. And even then, I wanted to live a storybook life.

My young, beautiful mother *had* already had a storybook life, with a childhood in Baghdad, then persecution, a failed escape across the mountains of Kurdistan, twenty days in prison, a successful escape to London and a whirlwind romance with my father – all by the time she was 22. She was my first heroine. I thought her life was high romance. My mother did not. She wanted to shield me from suffering, she wanted me never to have to go through what she'd gone through; she wanted me to have a boring life. Throughout my childhood, this outraged me. Never to have adventures? Never to do extraordinary things? Never to take risks? When I once wished aloud that I could go to prison because at least it would be interesting, my mother shuddered.

She wanted my life to have a happy ending: a wedding. Which I thought would be fine, if I could marry a prince. My first fictional heroine, even before I could read, was Sleeping Beauty. I liked her because she was beautiful. I wanted, very much, to have golden hair and blue eyes. My eyes had started blue and gone green, but maybe if I wished hard enough, they'd change back, and maybe my unruly brown curls would straighten and go blonde. Then I'd look like a princess, which was halfway to being one.

It was the end of the Seventies, and Lynda Carter was always on TV, as Wonder Woman, doing her dazzling spinning transformations. I would make myself dizzy in the living room, copying her, hoping my hair would fly free and a mystical ball of light would appear as my clothes were replaced, not by superheroine spangles but maybe by a dancing dress and probably a tiara.

And even though I now regard Sleeping Beauty with the proper feminist horror (her main characteristic is beauty! She spends a hundred years in a coma! She never *does* anything! She never *wants* anything!), I can't help but feel a residual affection for her. Because she was my first fictional heroine and she gave me a desire, an aim, a goal: I wouldn't have a boring life because although I would get married like my family wanted me to, I would marry a prince.

In the 1959 Disney film I watched over and over, the love story is the point. Sleeping Beauty is barely in danger. She's not even asleep for very long. She meets her square-jawed prince *before* she pricks her finger, so the minute she falls asleep, the race is on to find her, kiss her (because only true love's kiss will break the spell) and marry her. It all happens very quickly, and there's a similarly swift resolution of the fairies' argument about what colour Sleeping Beauty's dress should be (obviously, it ends up pink). This all made sense to me, then. And when, a bit later, I read the story in *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, where Sleeping Beauty is asleep for years and years, and the whole palace falls asleep with her, and a forest grows up around them, and it takes a real hero of a prince to hack his way through, I liked that even better.

Now I find the Grimm story a bit prissy. I like the girl stopped in time and the freeze-framed palace servants, and the brilliantly disquieting image of the many sad, young princes who try to get through the forest but die, in the flower of their youth, because 'the thorns held fast together, as if they had hands, and the youths were caught in them, could not get loose again, and died a miserable death'. But the story still hurtles towards a kiss, a wedding and a happy ever after. The version Charles Perrault wrote in 1697, a century before the Brothers Grimm cleaned up the story, is much darker and stranger.

Perrault's story doesn't end with the prince waking Sleeping Beauty with a kiss. Not at all. Instead, he goes on to tell us what happens after Sleeping Beauty gets married. She's out of the frying pan and almost literally into the fire, because her mother-in-law is a jealous ogress who orders her steward to kill and cook Beauty's

children, Dawn and Day, in 'piquant sauce'. The kind steward fools the ogress by cooking a lamb and a kid, but when she asks for beauty to be cooked in the same sauce, he panics, because although Beauty is officially 20, she's been asleep a hundred years. 'Her skin, though white and beautiful, had become a little tough, and what animal could he possibly find that would correspond to her?' He decides on venison. But the ogress knows she's been fooled, so she decides to kill Beauty, Dawn and Day herself. She gets a vat and fills it with vipers. Luckily her son returns and catches her red-handed. She dives into the vat herself and is devoured by the hideous creatures inside.

Only then can Sleeping Beauty and her prince and their mawkishly named children get a shot at living happily ever after. I love the fact that Perrault's princess goes on living and struggling after she finds her prince, and that Perrault doesn't shrink from the weirdness of Sleeping Beauty being over a hundred years old but having the body of a lithe young thing. When the prince wakes her, he considers telling her she's wearing the kind of clothes his grandmother used to wear, but decides it's best not to mention it just yet. Oh, and Perrault doesn't specify that Beauty's hair is blonde or straight. She could well be a curly-haired brunette.

Only recently I came across Giambattista Basile's even earlier version of the story, from 1634. His princess, named Talia, is warned that she will be in mortal danger if she ever goes near any flax. Her father duly forbids all flax, but one day Talia sees an old woman spinning, pricks her finger and falls down dead. The old woman is so scared that she runs away and, says Basile, 'is still running now'. Talia's grieving father has her laid out in one of his country mansions. Some time later, she is raped by a passing king and, nine months later, still unconscious, she gives birth to twins. Trying to find milk, the babies mistake her fingers for nipples and suck out the flax. The princess awakes. The rapist king returns and everyone's delighted. The only problem is, he's already married. So he takes Talia and her children to his palace and hides them away. His wife, understandably put out, tries to kill, cook and eat the interlopers. At the last minute she's foiled, Talia becomes the new queen, and the rather queasy moral of the story is that lucky people find good luck even in their sleep.

If I'd read that version as a child, then – like the old woman – I'd still be running now. But now even this nasty tale seems preferable to the mindlessly syrupy Disney film, with its faux-medieval costumes, simpering wasp-waisted princess and long scenes where she charms the forest creatures by trilling the same song over and over. I can't fathom why I ever wanted to be her. Though I still kind-of sort-of want her hair.

I do try to fight this retro-sexist yearning, but a few years ago, already in my thirties, I was interviewing an Orthodox Jewish wig-maker, as research for a play I was writing, and she invited me to try on a wig. I hesitated. She told me to shut my eyes. She pulled my hair taut into a bun at the nape of my neck, covered it in a net and scraped the wig's combs in at the sides to secure it. When I opened my eyes, I couldn't believe it. In the mirror there I was with fairy princess hair – blonde, poker-straight, shimmering to my waist. 'Does it move?' I whispered. She smiled. 'Why don't you flick it?' I did, and there I was, like the girl in the meadow in the Timotei advert, with my very own cascade of golden hair. Clearly, I hadn't entirely grown out of Sleeping Beauty.

Last year, as I watched Disney's recent film *Tangled*, I longed to have hair like Rapunzel's, not just blonde but so long she can use it to tie a man up, let herself down from a tower, and as a zip wire, lasso and swing. Rapunzel's hair even has magic healing powers. When it is cut and changes to a lovely burnished chestnut brown, she finds out that her tears can heal as well as her hair ever did; because, it turns out, brunettes are magic too. (Also in *Tangled*, when they kiss at the end, *she dips him*. Revolutionary stuff!)

Then, though, my hair wasn't the only thing stopping me becoming a princess. There was a bigger obstacle. I

loved sitting on the edge of my mother's dressing table, watching her put on her make-up, and playing with the kohl pots she'd brought from Baghdad, two shaped like trees, one shaped like a peacock, with a tail you pressed down to release the stopper. One evening, I confided my life plan, but she said, 'You can't marry a prince.' Just like that. 'There are no Jewish princes.' I was crestfallen. It did not occur to me that I didn't have to marry a Jew, or marry at all. I thought my dream was over. How would I ever become a princess now?

This conversation was the beginning of my realising we were different. My mother would say 'We are Jews. We never know when they might not like us any more and we'll have to get on a boat and just get out.' We had to stick together, we had to be alert, we had to avoid non-Jewish princes. And as Iraqi Jews, we were different even from other Jews. We ate rice instead of gefilte fish, we belly-danced instead of watching Woody Allen. We were a tiny community, a self-contained little world. So rarely did I meet anyone who wasn't an Iraqi Jew that until I went to school, I thought all grown-ups spoke Judeo-Arabic, and that English was just a children's language. I assumed that when I grew up I'd be fluent in Judeo-Arabic, just as I'd be taller. And married. And allowed to drive.

At the weekends, my family would sit around a table at my grandparents' house in Wembley, chain-smoking and talking about Baghdad. Their stories emerged from a grey-blue cloud. One of my earliest memories is of sitting under the table, pulling the stalks off parsley to make *tabbouleh* while above my head, the women made *sambousek bi tawa* (pastry crescents filled with spiced chickpeas), or *purdah pilau* (chicken and rice cooked in a 'veil' of pastry), or *ras asfoor b'shwander* (literally, little birds', heads, actually small meatballs cooked with beetroot in a sweet and sour sauce). Iraqi Jewish food is all mixed up, sweet and sour together, and so were the stories.

They talked about sleeping on the roof in the hot summers and seeing shooting stars, which they thought were UFOs; about the gazelle they kept as a pet; about learning to swim in the Tigris; about eating water buffalo cream for breakfast, sold by women who carried it on their heads in round, flat trays. It was as thick as cake, and the women would slice it with a hairpin for them to take home and eat with warm pitta bread and black, sticky date syrup.

They had ice cream that was chewy because it was made with mastic from crushed orchid roots – I've tasted it in a Turkish café in London so I know it exists. But I've never eaten *masgouf*, the enormous flat fish hauled from the Tigris and roasted on the riverbank, with spices, over an open flame. I've never seen the sandstorms that turned the skies red or the blind master musicians in dark glasses playing languorous songs of lost love.

I desperately wanted to go to Baghdad, preferably by magic carpet. I'd watched *The Thief of Bagdad* and *Sinbad the Sailor*, and I had a very clear image of my grandmother setting off for the copper market (where the banging was so loud you had to communicate in signs) perched elegantly on a fringed rug. But the red-and-blue carpet in our house wouldn't fly, no matter how long I spent sitting on it and wishing.

It was at synagogue, at Purim, that I found a possible solution to my princess problem. A loophole. The festival of Purim celebrates a heroine, Esther, who is Jewish and a queen – which was almost as good as being a princess. Like all small girls, I was less interested in queens than in princesses. Usually once a fairytale princess has married her prince, there's nothing more for her to do and the story is over. But Esther's story goes on after her marriage to King Ahasuerus as she saves the Jews of Persia from the prime minister who wants to kill them all.

At Purim, when we read the story, we would shout, stamp and rattle noisemakers to drown out the baddies' names. Grown-ups were required to drink so much they forgot the difference between good and evil. Iraqi

Jews gamble at Purim, so my synagogue would hire baize tables and roulette wheels to become, thrillingly, for just one night, a makeshift mini Monte Carlo. But the best thing about Purim was that it was the festival of fancy dress. All the girls wanted to go as Esther. In Tel Aviv, the whole city celebrates with a boozy, three-day carnival, and in the Orthodox suburbs hundreds of girls dress as Esther, all in white, with sparkly tiaras and wispy veils and bouquets of orange blossom; endless tiny brides. My Esther dress, made by my mother, was cream satin with gold braid and a tiara of silk roses. She zipped me into it and even daubed my eyelids with her best Seventies disco blue. I wanted to be Esther every day of the year.

My Hebrew teachers said I should like Esther for saving the Jews, but I was more interested in the bit before that, where she gets her king by winning a beauty contest. I imagined her as pretty as Sleeping Beauty, but a brunette. With green eyes. All right, I imagined her as a gorgeous, grown-up version of myself. And she *was* Jewish, and she *did* become a queen. (At Hebrew school, we skated over the fact that she married a man who wasn't Jewish. Everything was forgivable in a heroine who saved the Jews.)

Later, in synagogue again as a bored teenager, refusing to dress up and irritated by the noisemakers, I actually read the Megillah myself and I was shocked. There is no beauty contest. Ahasuerus is no doe-eyed prince. He's already executed his first wife, the captivating Vashti, for the monstrous crime of refusing to come when he sends for her. Esther attracts his attention when her uncle gets her to join the sex-starved king's harem.

Once queen, she does save the Jews. But she does it *so* passively. When she hears that the prime minister plans to kill her people, she's too timorous even to go and see the king. Instead she starts fasting. It doesn't say why. Does she fast for luck? Does she fast because thin girls win? No one knows. After three days, she invites Ahasuerus to dinner but the words dry in her mouth.

She invites him again the next night, and finally (with her people facing extinction, now, quite urgently) tells him she is Jewish and can he please not kill her people. He doesn't exactly say yes: he says he can't rescind the order now it's gone out (why not? He's the *king*) but he will allow the Jews to defend themselves. Which is big of him. So they do, killing a lot of Persians in the process. It's not the most unqualified of happy endings.

The less I liked Esther, the more interested I got in Vashti, the dissident queen. I'd been told she was a bad wife, and hideously vain – I suppose, to provide shadow and contrast to Esther's luminous innocence, she had to be cast as the evil queen. My Hebrew teachers had said she refused to answer the king's summons because she had terrible acne and didn't want him to see. Or because she'd been wickedly dabbling in witchcraft and had grown a tail and was desperately trying to magic it away. They didn't tell me that when Ahasuerus sends for her 'in her crown', he almost certainly means he wants her to rock up in just her crown, to be leered at by several hundred of his male friends, who have been partying for seven days. When she says no, the king's mates respond like stag-party morons. 'Vashti . . . hath not done wrong to the king only,' they opine, 'but also to the princes.' How has Vashti wronged the poor princes? 'This deed of the queen will come abroad unto all women, to make their husbands contemptible in their eyes.' Spooked by the idea that their wives might stop coming when they call, the louts get the king to issue a command to all women to obey their husbands. And that's it for Vashti. As a teenager, I switched allegiance. Vashti's defiance and pride seemed a lot more interesting than silent, docile Esther resorting to the most tired of feminine wiles (fasting and flirting) to get what she wanted. But now I wonder: if Vashti had stayed queen, would she have saved the Jews? The joke that all Jewish festivals boil down to the formula 'They tried to kill us! We survived! Let's eat!' is painfully true of Purim, and Esther's intervention (however unpalatable in terms of feminism) does save her people. I still like Vashti but I can also see the point of a heroine who stops a genocide by using the only strategies she knows.



Back then, however, Esther was paling into insignificance beside the new star of my heart: the Little Mermaid. In my battered, crayon-scribbled, pink book of Hans Christian Andersen's *Fairy Tales*, she is as blonde as Sleeping Beauty but her hair curls like the waves she lives in. Like me, the Little Mermaid faces impossible obstacles in her ambition to marry a prince. She longs to visit the human world above the sea, but she is too little. Her older sisters used to dream about going too, but once they're allowed to, and can go whenever they like, they become indifferent to it. Not so the Little Mermaid. When she's finally old enough to swim up to the surface, she is dazzled. She sees a ship and, spying through the porthole, she falls in love with the first human she sees, who happens to be a handsome prince. She watches him party on board the ship, wishing she could join him. And when a storm blows up and the ship is smashed up, she risks her life to swim through the wreckage to drag the prince to safety on the shore.

At home in the mermaid kingdom at the bottom of the sea, she gets depressed that her love can never be. (There's a load of gobbledegook here about how mermaids live for three hundred years and then dissolve into spume, while the Little Mermaid would rather have a short human life and be rewarded with an immortal soul. I ignored all this when I was small, and it makes no more sense to me now.) She goes to a witch and gets a potion that will turn her tail into legs. The witch warns that getting legs will be very painful, like a sharp knife cutting into her flesh, and that afterwards, though she'll *look* graceful, she'll *feel* as if she's walking on swords, and there will be blood. And if she doesn't succeed in winning the prince's love, her heart will break and she'll die instantly. Worst of all: the witch wants the Little Mermaid's sweet voice as payment.

Undaunted, inspired by love, the Little Mermaid sticks out her tongue for the witch to cut it out. She swoons in pain and wakes (as all swooning women should) to see the handsome prince gazing down at her. He's probably staring so hard because she's got no clothes on. Andersen is coy about it, but why else would she immediately try 'to cover herself with her long, thick hair'? It seems that Operation Win The Prince is go, but sadly the prince is unworthy of the Little Mermaid's love. He pets her and calls her his 'dear little foundling', but he doesn't twig that she's the one who saved him from the shipwreck, and now that she has no voice, she can't tell him. He doesn't see her as bride material, but that doesn't stop him hugging and kissing her and wishing (aloud! the manipulative cad) they could get married. And then he goes and marries someone else and, rubbing salt in the wound, makes the Little Mermaid a bridesmaid.

Her heart clearly broken, she prepares to die. But then her sisters rise up out of the sea, pale and bald. They've given the witch their own radiant hair, in return for a knife which the Little Mermaid can use to stab the prince. If she bathes her legs in his warm blood they will transform into a new, shimmering mermaid tail and she can come home.

But the Little Mermaid can't do it. She loves the prince too much. So she dives into the sea and sacrifices herself. She turns into foam, as mermaids do. At this point, harking back to the stuff about souls, Andersen bolts on a perplexing Christian salvation message about how the Little Mermaid can earn a soul if she is good for three hundred years, but every time she sees 'a rude, naughty child', she'll get more time in purgatory. Don't be rude or naughty or the mermaids will suffer? Please. Even as a child, I knew this was ridiculous.

Now, this seems the least of the problems in this cruel, woman-hating story.

I can't quite believe that I was so keen on a story about a mermaid who *gives up her voice for legs to get a man*. Put as starkly as that, it's obvious what an affront it is. Also, the legs aren't so she can walk. In Andersen's story, mermaids can live on land, but the Little Mermaid's grandmother tells her that while mermaids think their tail is their best feature, humans think it is hideous. So the Little Mermaid submits to

horrific pain purely to conform to an alien and incomprehensible ideal of beauty. You don't have to be Naomi Wolf to have issues with this.

And then there's the business about losing her voice. In *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia has her tongue cut out and her hands hacked off and she still manages to tell her father the name of her attacker (so he can avenge her), by writing in the sand, the stick clutched between her bloody stumps. Shakespeare gives Lavinia a bit of agency. Andersen never even lets the Little Mermaid use sign language. Her campaign to win the prince's heart consists of her staring at him mournfully. Of course he goes off and marries someone a bit more lively.

The other stories in my Andersen book are about underdogs too, but they get happy endings. (Andersen's life had a similar trajectory, from grim poverty to literary stardom.) The ugly duckling becomes a swan, Thumbelina marries a miniature prince and even grows wings, Gerda rescues her friend Kai, who has been abducted by the Snow Queen, and melts his frozen heart. And after her dreadful night of pea-induced sleeplessness, the princess passes the test and gets her prince. But not the Little Mermaid.

As I grew old enough to read the stories for myself, I became dissatisfied with princesses. Later, in my teens, I shunned them completely and denounced all fairy tales as instruments of the patriarchy. Andrea Dworkin would teach me to damn Sleeping Beauty as 'that object of every necrophiliac's lust – the innocent, victimised . . . beauteous lump of ultimate, sleeping good'. The princesses did nothing. The mothers were evil, jealous harridans, Freud's darlings. The old women were bitter crones. At university I discovered the poet Anne Sexton's take on Sleeping Beauty in her 1971 collection *Transformations*; her Beauty has been abused by her father, and when the prince wakes her with a kiss, she recoils, thinking it's her father, coming back to hurt her again. After this horror, she can't have a happy ending. And her century of catatonia has left her so terrified of sleep that she can't live her life. Sexton tells the story as if it torments her, but she has to tell it, and she ends with a restive uncertainty about what it really means.

It was Angela Carter who started bringing me back to fairy tales. Her revisionist stories, in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), emphasise how uncanny fairy tales are, with their strange lacunae and unexplained twists. Her heroines aren't innocent good girls: they are complicit, almond-eyed, ripe for corruption. She doesn't tackle Sleeping Beauty – perhaps she was just too passive to be rewritten – but I do love her take on Bluebeard. The young heroine (so young she's happiest in faded gingham and serge skirts, like a girl in a Colette story) is fascinated by her rich older husband, a marquis (not de Sade but he might as well be) who walks as though on velvet, smells of spiced leather, smokes cigars as fat as a baby's arm and showers her with presents: marrons glacés, furs and a necklace of blood-red rubies originally made by his aristocratic grandmother who was defying the guillotine. Exploring her new home, she finds erotica that makes her gasp, and then she finds a torture room and the embalmed corpses of his three previous wives. The marquis, of course, plans to guillotine her. But the audacity of Carter's ending makes me laugh with relief and joy because just as the girl faces death, her mother arrives, hair flying, skirts rucked up to the thigh, clutching her father's old gun in one hand, and shoots the marquis dead. Yes, it's a startling reversal but every generation spins fairy tales their own way. It's no more implausible than all those happy-ever-afters. And why shouldn't it be the heroine's gutsy mother who saves her, rather than some handsome huntsman or layabout prince?

As I'm wondering if *The Little Mermaid* could be rewritten too, I ask my small god-daughter why she likes her so much, and she's indignant. 'It's a happy ending! They get married!' She introduces me to Disney's 1989 film which does, indeed, have a happy ending. Disney's Little Mermaid has a name (Ariel) and she's an entrancing redhead, and a talented singer about to make her concert debut. Her luscious soprano captures the heart of the prince (incongruously named Eric) when he hears her singing during the shipwreck. So when she gives up her voice, she gives up a potential career, and also the quality that makes her most attractive to men.

There's none of the nonsense about legs like swords; Ariel is a bit unsteady on her new feet, but that only gives her the perfect excuse to lean giddily on Eric's arm. And she doesn't get legs for beauty's sake but because she has to be a human to woo a human; it is assumed she won't be able to move around on dry land without legs. The witch also persuades her to give up her voice by saying men don't like chatty women. She's wrong, of course; Eric has fallen in love with Ariel's voice. Even the witch knows it isn't true: monstrously ugly, and vain, with a husky rasp, she wants to steal Ariel's voice and use it to attract Eric for herself. This is not a film about women silencing themselves to get a man.

Ariel gets the prince, defeats the witch, gets her voice back and even gets her father to bless their unconventional marriage. Watching the film now, with my god-daughter, makes me wish I'd seen it as a child. Its exuberance totally rejuvenates the story and I can't help thinking my life would be different if I'd known Disney's Little Mermaid, not Andersen's.

And yet I can't shake the Andersen story. I keep returning to his image of the Little Mermaid's sisters rising up out of the sea, like avenging angels. And I wonder if his story could be read as a cautionary tale for women saying: Don't give up your voice! Don't make sacrifices for unworthy men! And definitely don't mutely kill yourself when they go off with other women! Instead, the story (maybe) advocates killing your prince with a knife given to you by the sisterhood (literally), and returning to the sea where, after all, there are plenty more fish. Not to mention attractive, suitable mermen.

That's just the kind of heroine I could get behind now. But it also seems obvious to me why I loved the Little Mermaid as a child. It's nothing to do with her being a princess, or her quest to marry a prince. It's because, like me, she's caught between two worlds. I was homesick for Baghdad, even though I'd never been there and everyone told me I would never get to go. And Andersen lavishes some of his most sensuous and heart-rending prose on the beauty of the world at the bottom of the sea, the world his heroine wrenches herself from, never to return. Painfully he portrays her trying to fit in with the humans, a misunderstood misfit who is no longer a mermaid, not quite a human. She never quite manages it – and Andersen knew that feeling: he never managed to fit into his new, glamorous life. He was insecure, desperate for praise, always fawning on anyone with money, beauty or power. He never found love. And even his friends found him ingratiating. So instead of giving her a happy ending, like his other protagonists, he gave the Little Mermaid those complicated feelings about being an outsider and walking painfully through a world he could never truly communicate with, and never, ever being able to go back home.

The witch spells it out: 'you can never again become a mermaid . . . You may never return to your sisters, and your father's palace.' Then, I read this with a lump in my throat because I knew my family could never return to Iraq. I still well up when I read about how the Little Mermaid creeps out of the palace every night to sit on the marble steps that go down to the sea, to cool her feet in the water; her legs really do feel like swords and only the sea can numb the pain and wash away the blood. Her sisters swim towards her, arm in arm, singing sadly because they miss her so much. They even bring their old grandmother and their father, who are too old to swim close enough to speak to the Little Mermaid. She sees them across the waves and weeps. It's a devastating image of deracination.

When I was a child, this connected with images from the two films my brother and cousins and I watched over and over at our grandparents' house: *The Sound of Music* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. While the grown-ups talked about having to leave their home in Baghdad, we would alternate the videos – Nazis one week, Cossacks the next. I knew that the Von Trapp family walking out over the Alps was somehow the same as the Jews packing up the shtetl, and that both were no different from my family leaving Baghdad, and the Little Mermaid leaving the sea. These stories helped me grapple with fears I couldn't articulate, terrors of displacement and separation and loss. I hadn't lost my home, my language or my country, but I was picking

up on the grown-ups' fears. And I was starting to doubt that marrying a prince would solve them. My most tattered and destroyed book, a read-along picture book of *The Story of Henny Penny*, is about a different kind of heroine, a brave red chicken who thinks the sky is falling down and goes on a journey (so there, Joseph Campbell) to tell the king. But a fox gets her friends, and although she survives, she never manages to tell the king. This petrified me. What if the sky really was falling down? Didn't the king need to know? Henny Penny is a heroine on a mission, a heroine who does something, a heroine with a social conscience, a heroine who knows fear. And she's not a princess, or trying to become one.

Maybe I didn't want to be a princess after all. Maybe, just maybe, there was more to life than that.

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