

University of Southern California, Fall 2025
CORE 200: Reading Salon
Once Upon a Time, They Lived Happily Ever After: Fairytales Told and Retold

“Fairytales are always more interesting when something is added to them. Each new retelling recharges the narrative, making it crackle and hiss with cultural energy.” – Maria Tartar

Every world culture has some version of the fairytale or the folktale. Since time immemorial, we’ve gathered around the fire and told stories of child heroes and trickster gods, of supernatural rewards and punishments, of true love and terrible villains. What do these stories have in common? How are our beliefs revealed through the narratives we pass down? And how have these tales been retold and reshaped to reflect different values over time?

Turning to collections of fairytales old and new, we’ll examine folk stories from every continent and a wide variety of cultural traditions. We’ll learn from critics and scholars about different approaches to understanding these narratives, from feminist, psychoanalytic, and structuralist perspectives, among others. In addition, each student will select a world culture or region to present some stories from, to ground our exploration globally and historically.

Are we still telling folktales today? Does Afrofuturist speculative fiction count? Or queer fanfic? Why do so many of our favorite creators rework classic themes of vulnerable orphans and evil stepmothers, heroes and monsters? This semester, we’ll engage with a wide variety of poets, songwriters, playwrights, novelists, and filmmakers who return again and again to these fairytale tropes, these tales as old as time.

CORE 200 lasts for twelve weeks (instead of the usual fifteen) and meets once each week for two hours in a seminar setting. The Salon encourages the sharing of ideas and thoughts, highlights common themes and interdisciplinary connections as they emerge from discussion. Discussions that grow out of reading groups can become the starting point for future research. The two-unit Salon is an integral part of the Thematic Approaches to Humanities and Society minor. A special feature of the Reading Salon is that some of the books to be read by the participants will be selected by the students. The course is graded Credit/No Credit.

Possible Course Texts (final list to be determined by the class)

ed. Bernheimer, Kate. *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me: Forty New Fairy Tales*. [978-0143117841]
Burton, Tim. *Edward Scissorhands*. (1990)
Caro, Niki. *Mulan*. (2020)
Carter, Angela. *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. [978-0143107613]
Cocteau, Jean. *Le Belle et la Bete*. (1946)
del Toro, Guillermo. *Pan’s Labyrinth*. (2006)
ed. Ellen Oh and Elsie Chapman. *A Thousand Beginnings and Endings*. [978-0062671165]
Machado, Carmen Maria. *Her Body and Other Parties*. [978-1555977887]
Miyazaki, Hayao. *Spirited Away*. (2001)
Powell, Michael and Emeric Pressburger. *The Red Shoes*. (1948)
ed. Tatar, Maria. *The Classic Fairytales* (Norton Critical Edition). [978-0393602975]
Sondheim, Steven. *Into the Woods*. [Original Broadway Cast Recording] [ASIN: B0037BCWW8]
ed. Yolen, Janet. *Favorite Folktales from Around the World*. [978-0394751887]