



Ten of the Best: Traditional Tales retold

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Ten of the Best

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chosen by **Pam Dix**.

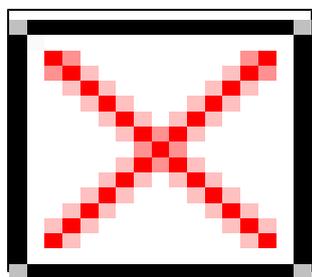
Pam Dix chooses ten of her favourite picture book retellings of traditional tales

Marcus Sedgwick, in his Guardian review of David Almond's latest book, **A Song for Ella Grey**, a retelling of the Orpheus myth, said that the 'true test of a retelling is that the story must rise out of its origins to become something worthwhile in its own right'. It is this mixing up, the familiar with the new, that attracts and excites readers.

A Song for Ella Grey is for older readers, but young children are also able to read intertextually, spot references and identify links to other stories. This is, as Margaret Meek Spencer points out in **How Texts Teach What Readers Learn**, what allows them to join the 'community of readers'. They are given the opportunity to become the co-creator of the story, to bring to the reading what they know already, and to identify changes and developments so that their own reading becomes deeper and more insightful. Retellings are frequently funny, with a humour that is based on twisting the familiar story into new, sometimes shocking, versions.

The following are my favourite picture book versions. Picture books give the further excitement of reading the image as well as the text. We see different points of view, role reversals, plot twists, alternative settings. In this world of co-creation, the reader becomes a creative partner, an interpreter. There is a body of theoretical study behind these approaches including the work of Jack Zipes and the still relevant series of **Changing Stories** and **Making Stories** published in the 1980s by the English and Media Centre and written by Bronwyn Mellor.

Previously

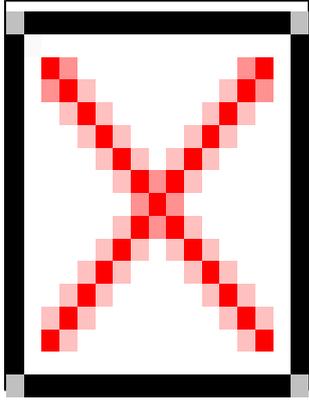


Allan Ahlberg, illus Bruce Ingman, Walker, 32pp, 978-1406313505, £5.99

For the youngest readers the call on prior knowledge starts with the introduction of nursery rhyme and fairy tale characters into stories. For those 'in the know' there is a deeper level of humour as their prior knowledge is activated, but the books still work as stories in their own right. The Ahlbergs led the way in this and generations of children have enjoyed and still enjoy recognising the characters in **The Jolly Postman**, **The Jolly Christmas Postman**, and **Each Peach Pear Plum**. A personal favourite is **Previously** because of the gravity young children bring to their reading of the word 'previously' as they tell the back-story of their favourite characters.

Hansel and Gretel

Anthony Browne, Walker, 32pp, 978-1406318524, £5.99 pbk



In Browne's **Hansel and Gretel**, details in the illustrations draw the reader into a complex psychological interpretation of character, forcing parallels between the stepmother and the witch. This remains my favourite retelling.

Revolting Rhymes

Roald Dahl, illus Quentin Blake, Puffin, 48pp, 978-0141350370, £7.99 pbk

Roald Dahl's **Revolting Rhymes** contains a collection of six well-known fairy tales as fresh now in the retelling as they were when they were written in the 1980s, and still delighting and shocking new generations of readers. It contains the immortal lines about Red Riding Hood:

?The small girl smiles. One eyelid flickers.

She whips a pistol from her knickers.?

Dahl himself can be heard reading this on the Poetry Archive.

Goldilocks on CCTV

John Agard, illus Satoshi Kitamura, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 64pp, 978-1847804990, £8.99 pbk

For an older secondary audience, John Agard's **Goldilocks on CCTV** sets the familiar characters in a very modern 21st century context. Goldilocks is captured on CCTV in her housebreaking venture; Red Riding Hood has been cloned. The dark side of the tales is not avoided as shown in the Uncle Bluebeard poem, which painfully explores the hidden secret of a family member.

Little Red Hood

Marjolaine Leray, Phoenix Yard Books, 40pp, 978-1907912009, £7.99 hbk

The Red Riding Hood story is a rich source for many writers, both in adult and children's fiction. The wolf has the status of the most threatening of images in children's literature, at the same time as being an image that is frequently played around with in ambiguous ways. Both the red cloak and the wolf have become symbols that are immediately recognisable, even when the story is not specifically a fairy tale retelling. In Anthony Browne's **The Tunnel** and **Into the Forest** they are used to give a sense of danger and threat and indeed Browne uses fairy tale images masterfully in many of his works.

One of my favourite Red Riding Hood retellings is Marjolaine Leray's **Little Red Hood** which shows a feisty Red Riding Hood tricking the wolf in a fearless way. Red and black drawn images on a white background with handwritten text add to the immediacy of the retelling. No grandmother is needed here. The relationship focuses totally on the girl

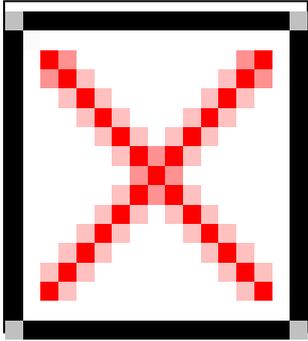
and the wolf. The denouement brings a gasp of shocked delight in adult and child readers.

Another translation from the French that's worth mentioning is Delphine Perret's **The Big Bad Wolf and Me** (Sterling) which has a similar graphic representation of the wolf. Here we have the story of a wolf who has to practise being fierce as he has been mistaken for a dog, and is coached by a young boy. While this is not a retelling, prior knowledge of the characteristics of the fairy tale wolf is at the core of the humour. This book works extremely well used alongside Sara Fanelli's **Wolf!** (Egmont) with Fanelli's distinctive collage style and playfulness.

Good Little Wolf

Nadia Shireen, Jonathan Cape, 32pp, 978-1780080017, £5.99 pbk

In Nadia Shireen's **Good Little Wolf**, the good little wolf, meets the Big Bad Wolf, and there is a humorous



exchange between the two, ending with the Big Bad Wolf drinking his tea with two empty chairs posing the question of the fate of his erstwhile companions. The sympathies of the reader are cunningly shifted as the book progresses.

I'd also like to mention Jan Fearnley in her Mr Wolf series (Egmont) in which she mixes up wolves and grandmothers and eating in new combinations, with outcomes that are truly shocking.

Me and You

Anthony Browne, Corgi, 32pp, 978-0552559102, £7.99 pbk

Goldilocks in Anthony Browne's retelling **Me and You** is set in a city and explores the motivation of Goldilocks ? what makes a young girl not only break into a house but also eat the food and get into a stranger's bed? It has two consecutive narratives: the story of the girl on the left hand pages in graphic format, with the comfortably off middle class bears in a more colourful representation on the right hand page.

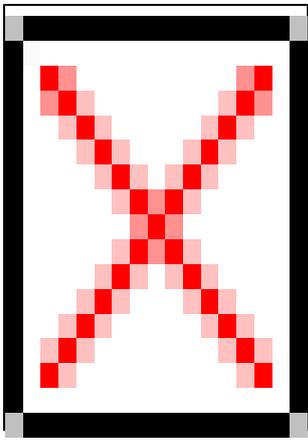
Goldilocks and the Three Bears

Lauren Child, Puffin, 32pp, 978-0141501253, £7.99 pbk

Another delightful version of Goldilocks is by Lauren Child. This uses toys photographed in a small world woodland set to explore and place the story. In this case Goldilocks is a rather cute doll, but there is something sinister about dolls, and the twist comes at the end to the delight of the child reader who notices Baby Bear wearing her red shoes. Child has also produced two delightful post-modern picture books that mix up fairy tale characters and reality ? **Beware the Storybook Wolves** and **Whose Afraid of the Big Bad Book?**

Tale Moderne series

Steven Guarnaccia, Abrams 32pp,



In his **Tale Moderne** series, Steven Guarnaccia has included retellings of **Goldilocks**, **Cinderella** and **The Three Little Pigs**, all updated to modern stylish settings with endpapers that include design icons. These are fairy tales as fashion in a contemporary context.

The True Story of the Three Little Pigs

Jon Scieszka, illus Lane Smith, Puffin, 32pp, 978-0140540567, £7.99 pbk

This is one of the first examples of telling the story from an alternative viewpoint, in this case the wolf's:

?I'm the wolf. Alexander T. Wolf. You can call me Al. I don't know how this Big Bad Wolf thing got started but it's all wrong.?

This still deserves its place in any list.

It does not matter if children read the original version of the story before or after a retelling ? these are all stories that stand-alone ? and the fun comes when they read more widely.

Pam Dix currently teaches children's literature in the **Education Studies Department** at **London Metropolitan University** and is writing training materials for **Book Aid International**. She is chair of **IBBY UK** and also of the **Akili Trust** (a small charity working in rural Kenya). She was a school librarian and head of a school library service until retirement.

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