

A Ride on the Red Mare's Back

Don LaCoss

a review of

Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Ride on the Red Mare's Back*. Illustrated by Julie Downing. New York: Orchard Books, 1992.

During a trip to Sweden in the 1980s, a friend gave Ursula Le Guin a small, red-painted wooden horse. This sort of figurine—called a Dalahiist, or “Dala Horse”—is a Swedish folk-art tradition that is at least four centuries old and is associated with the Dalarna region of central Sweden near the Norwegian border, and it fired Le Guin’s imagination.

Popular belief has it that the red horses originated in those villages in Dalarna, well known for hand-carved clock-casings and furniture. It is believed that the horses were originally meant as toys; they were whittled with a knife from scrap pine wood at night as the family gathered around the blazing fire during the cold, dark winter months. Its distinctive colors, along with other decorative elements (painted flower garlands, bridles and saddles), are closely related to the furniture designs from those villages. The toys became very popular and soon evolved into a cottage-industry where they were bartered by rural families for household necessities in the larger cities.

Le Guin was fascinated by her Dala Horse and began to research it. Because of its popularity in Sweden, she said, she had assumed that there were many legends associated with the small red wooden horses. But despite the fact that Pagan horse-worship in pre-Christian Northern Europe had been quite widespread and difficult to eradicate (horse imagery was used as damning evidence in Scandinavian witch-trials well into the seventeenth century), Le Guin could find no definitive connection between the toy horses and folklore. Le Guin says that this dearth inspired her to create her own myth for the Dala Horse, and this is what became the children’s book *A Ride on the Red Mare's Back*.

This haunting story is set on the first day of winter in a remote, snow-blanketed forest of the north “a long time ago, when the world was wild.” It concerns a nameless young girl’s quest to rescue her little brother, who was kidnapped by trolls while out hunting with his father. Since her mother has to stay in the small cottage to care for a newborn baby and her traumatized father can only stare into the fire and nurse his bruises from the troll attack, the girl resolutely decides that it is her job to find the stolen child. She does so with the simple focus and clarity of a child’s logic: she bundles up against the cold and the dark, packs a ball of yarn, a pair of wooden knitting needles, the red scarf that she was making her brother, a warm loaf of her mother’s freshly-baked bread, and her toy horse, and she slips out into the wilderness without telling her parents what she intends to do.

Initially, the girl takes the red horse—her only toy, carved and painted by her father—to help her screw up her courage and to fight off doubt and loneliness. But she soon learns that the horse has some supernatural properties: during her first encounter with a troll, the red mare grows to full size, speaks to her, and carries her off through the deep snow to the trolls’ “High House” in a faraway mountain cavern. But the mare’s magic is not of the omnipotent variety, and the horse tells the girl that she needs to rely on her own daring and wits to rescue her brother. Indeed, the trials that the girl faces (including an unpleasant surprise when she finally locates her sibling) are not overcome through magic or violence, but through resourcefulness, pluck, and the few common items that she had brought with her.

It's difficult for me to say for what age group this book is intended—somewhere between five and twelve, I'm guessing. *A Ride on the Red Mare's Back* runs about 30 pages of 14-point type divided into five chapters with about a dozen or so large illustrations, lots of white space, and wide margins framed by traditional designs of tree branches and flower blossoms; it's still a bit text-heavy for younger audiences, but the read-aloud cadences are pitch-perfect. Le Guin tells the story in a spare, simple, and straight-forward way, but like so many fables and fairy tales, there is still plenty of room for readers' own interpretation of events. At an impromptu reading of the book that I gave last October in a neighborhood schoolyard at recess, a dozen or so children between the ages of five and seven were swept up in the tale; they peppered me with questions about whether or not the girl was frightened and how it was that she was able to figure out what she needed to do in order to save her brother. They all feared for the horse's safety when the trolls pursued the mare, and they wanted to closely study Julie Downing's watercolor illustrations, eager to get a good look at the trolls, to stare at the magnificent red mare, and to spot clues that would unearth the secrets of the young heroine's success.

There is much to admire and enjoy in *A Ride on the Red Mare's Back*. Obviously, a tale about a courageous, clever, and independent girl who faces dire challenges with gumption and imagination—be it Lewis Carroll's Alice, Astrid Lindgren's Pippi Longstocking, or Neil Gaiman's Coraline would instinctively appeal to majority of *Fifth Estate* readers. But the story of Le Guin's effort to create her own folktale for the Dala Horse is as inspirational as the story she tells of the young girl who saves her brother from the trolls of High House.

As Angela Carter's amazing work on translating, writing, and reconfiguring fairy tales has shown, relevant and radically critical ideas are investigated in do-it-yourself mythmaking just as they are in utopian writings. Every day we are all bombarded by competing narratives (philosophical, religious, sociopolitical, commercial, techno-scientific) that try to explain and explore the complexities of the world and human experience; rather than choosing one of these prefabricated "just-so" story to surrender to, perhaps we should be energizing our imagination to create our own highly personalized collection of fables, tall tales, and enchanted histories of everyday objects, just as Le Guin has done here. There is, of course, no need to believe these stories—I've probably been reading Greek myths since I was nine, and I have yet to begin devoutly worshipping Poseidon—but instead to enjoy them as previous attempts by a people to craft their own ethical and existential place in the world. Mythological thinking charts the efforts of ancients to probe the mysteries of behavior, of social order, and of the inner realities of perception and thought, all of which are struggles that remain very relevant to many of us to this day.

Like Alan Lomax's recordings of Mississippi chain-gang chants and sharecropper field songs, the traditional children's stories, "household tales," and Teutonic mythology compiled by the nineteenth-century Romantic philologists Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were meant to preserve a world that was disappearing. In the case of the Brothers Grimm, they were trying to preserve remnants of pre-Christian, pre-industrial German culture that was being crushed by the rapid transformation of the German middle-classes and its consolidation of power. These new capitalist formations were armed with new myths: the sanctity of the patriarchal family, economic independence, Enlightened progress, Prussian nationalism, the spiritual satisfactions of elite high culture, and militarist modernity. Although they eventually bowdlerized their folk-tales to fit contemporary bourgeois values and aspirations, the initial impetus for the Grimms' project was to offer a "natural poetry" alternative to the unhappy changes that they saw going on around them daily. Collecting old tales is one way that the Romantics did this; creating them yourself (William Blake, for example) is another.

"We live in an age in which myths are crumbling," the Egyptian surrealist Ramsis Yfinan wrote from within the historical context of Nasser's secular, authoritarian technocratic modernization project. "This has happened not because science has taken the place of old wives' tales, but because people have stopped believing in these old legends of 'absolute knowledge.'" He continues:

A real myth acts like a compass and fulfills various roles in defining human existence and fixing a place among the various hidden and apparent forces of the universe. It reveals human origins and fate and maps out the course of action and goals. It explains dreams and thereby fulfills everything that the heart, mind, and imagination might wish for...The origins of myth are completely unimportant; the only importance of myth is to fill emptiness in the soul and to act as a fertile ground for light and inspiration to grow. Accordingly, there are no essential differences between the roles played by Isis and Osiris in ancient Egypt, the role played by the concept of Tao in China, or the roles played by both the Virgin Mother and the Third Dimension in the art of Renaissance Italy.

Le Guin's *A Ride on the Red Mare's Back* provides an engrossing and enjoyable story, but it also serves as a study in the critical functions of mythopoeia. To quote Yfindn, Le Guin's simple neo-folktale provides "fertile ground" for the developing new strategies for problem-solving and new models of autonomy that lie outside of the channels of today's mass-mediated myths. Its ability to encourage others to construct fables of their own is its most precious gift.

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