

Forgotten fairytales slay the Cinderella stereotype

Stories lost in Bavarian archive for 150 years and newly translated into English offer surprisingly modern characters

• [The Turnip Princess](#), by Franz Xaver von Schönwerth



Erika Eichenseer, a retired teacher who has dedicated herself to exploring Franz Xaver von Schönwerth's work since the 1990s, on fairytale trail in woodland outside Regensburg, in Bavaria Photograph: Philip Oltermann for the Guardian

[Philip Oltermann](#) in Regensburg

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Once upon a time ... the fairytales you thought you knew had endings you wouldn't recognise. A new collection of German folk stories has Hansel and Gretel getting married after an erotic encounter with a dwarf, an enchanted frog being kissed not by a damsel in distress but by a young man, and Cinderella using her golden slippers to recover her lover from beyond the moon.

The stash of stories compiled by the 19th-century folklorist Franz Xaver von Schönwerth – recently rediscovered in an archive in Regensburg and now to be published in English for the first time this spring – challenges preconceptions about many of the most commonly known fairytales.

Harvard academic Maria Tatar argues that they reveal the extent to which the most influential collectors of fairytales, the Brothers Grimm, often purged their stories of surreal and risqué elements to make them more palatable for children.

“Here at last is a transformation that promises real change in our understanding of fairytale magic,” says Tatar, who has translated Schönwerth's stories for a new Penguin edition called *The Turnip Princess*. “Suddenly we discover that the divide between passive princesses and dragon-slaying heroes may be little more than a figment of the Grimm imagination.”

Many of the stories centre around surprisingly emancipated female characters. In *The Stupid Wife*, a woman hands out her belongings to the poor but recoups her wealth after scaring off a band of thieves. In *The Girl and the Cow*, the heroine releases her prince after grabbing an axe and whacking off the tail of a large black cat.

Schönwerth's decision to start collecting folk stories was directly inspired by the Grimms, who praised his efforts. In 1885, Jacob Grimm remarked that “nowhere in the whole of [Germany](#) is anyone collecting [folklore] so accurately, thoroughly and with such a sensitive ear”.

But while the Grimms collected their stories across the social spectrum, mainly in Hesse and Westphalia, Schönwerth's tales were recorded predominantly among workers in Bavaria's Upper Palatine region.

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16 Abbildungen. — M. Regensburg.

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A book from the Schönwerth archive.

While the Grimms maintained an academic distance when processing their material, their deeply religious Bavarian counterpart had a tendency to dive straight into a world full of talking animals and mystical apparitions. Some of Schönwerth's notes suggest that he shared some of his interviewees' belief in creatures such as the *Holz mädchen*, or woodland maidens, who came to help the peasants at night.

Most of the tales don't set the scene with "Once upon a time", but start *in medias res*: "A prince was ill", "A prince was lost in the wood", or "A king had a son with hair of gold".

Schönwerth's critical revival is largely due to Erika Eichenseer, an 80-year-old retired teacher who has dedicated herself to exploring and promoting his oeuvre since the early 1990s. She runs regular storytelling evenings and theatre workshops inspired by Schönwerth's stories across Bavaria. A fairytale trail in the woodland outside Regensburg, featuring contemporary artists' takes on some of the stories, was unveiled in September.

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Having at first been told that Schönwerth's 30,000 pages of literary legacy in the city archives contained only records of local customs and sayings, she eventually unearthed more than 500 fairytales that had been gathering dust for more than 150 years.

The tales she discovered, says Eichenseer, weren't children's fairytales in the way we know them from the Grimms, but stories that explored the transition between childhood and adulthood in fantastical ways.

A number of them feature long periods of sleep, after which the main characters wake up with a changed shape or appearance. "People often say fairytales are cruel," says Eichenseer. "But life is cruel. And children know that."

A [2012 Guardian article](#) on the discovery of Schönwerth's tales triggered an avalanche of requests for interviews and commercial offers from around the globe, including an email from Warner Bros inquiring about film rights. "I just didn't get back," says Eichenseer; her nephew told her the studio mainly made action films, she says.

In the rest of Germany, interest has so far remained subdued. While Tatar insists that no other folklorists from the period measure up to Schönwerth, fellow fairytale expert Jack Zipes has questioned the tales' literary merit, suggesting that there were "literally 50 or 60 [collections that are more interesting than Schönwerth's](#)".

The fact that some of Schönwerth's folk tales were republished in the 1930s as part of a Nazi drive to foster "Aryan" traditions may have tainted their legacy in Germany.

Eichenseer has a different theory: “In Germany, there’s this attitude that goes, ‘We’ve got our Grimms, and we don’t need anybody else.’ The Grimms were better at selling themselves. Schönwerth was always a bit too shy.”