Abstract: Proceeding with the notion that children’s television producers can (and often do) avail themselves of the possibilities of both medium and fairy-tale form, this chapter considers how various programs have presented “Little Red Riding Hood” (ATU 333), as its prominence in the European diasporic canon has led to its perennial adaptation. Vernacular narratives comprise a store of public domain materials freely adaptable to generate inexpensive content for a captive and allegedly non-discerning audience. A tale’s ongoing presence in multiple versions, through the child’s (presumed) exposure to them through multiple media (including other television), provides a low entry point to the specific program: the story is recognizable to the child or the adult making viewing choices on behalf of the child. Finally, the screen’s presence within the familiar confines of the family home and the small size of its audience at the time of viewing provide an intimacy closer to interpersonal communication than in other mediations like film and theater.
The presentation of fairy tales and traditional literature in children’s television reflects both the best and the worst of the medium. In many respects it represents a logical extension of the infantilization of tale already present in the nineteenth century with the reframing of folktale as a children’s genre. In this chapter, we consider how various programs have presented “Little Red Riding Hood” (ATU 333). The tale’s prominence in the Western canon, in cross-cultural reinterpretations, and within the scholarly literature (Heckert 2008, 2013; Dundes 1969) offers a wealth of examples through its perennial adaptation by children’s television producers. By focusing on the one tale, we allow ourselves room to consider how various producers choose to play with or to adhere to the type. As we discuss, fairy tale in children’s television faces a triple-faceted “triviality barrier” (Sutton-Smith 1970): a maligned genre in a maligned medium for a maligned audience. However, we eschew the cynical approach and instead adapt a hermeneutic of openness, proceeding with the notion that children’s television producers can (and often do) avail themselves of the possibilities of both medium and fairy-tale form. The screen’s presence within the familiar confines of the family home and the small size of its audience at the time of viewing provide an intimacy closer to interpersonal communication than in other mediations like film and theater.

Canons of vernacular narrative comprise a store of public domain materials freely adaptable to generate inexpensive content for a captive and allegedly non-discerning audience. A
tale’s ongoing presence in multiple versions, through the child’s (presumed) exposure to them through storytelling, literature (as read or read to), film, toys, or other television, provides a low entry point to the specific program: the story is recognizable to the child or the adult making viewing choices on behalf of the child. Fairy tale’s formulaic nature—the deep structural patterns described by Vladimir Propp (1971) and built upon by Bengt Holbeck (1989)—eases adaptation by making simple correlations between the characters of a tale type and a program’s established characters (as we describe in the following for Max and Ruby [2002–2013] and Sesame Street [1969–]).

Unlike mediations for other audiences, however, producers often hedge on this presumption of exposure, and one can distinguish programs along a spectrum: at one end, no assumed familiarity is made, the version is self-contained, and all a child really needs to do is listen; at the other, familiarity not only with the tale but with a variety of cultural tropes is assumed, and as the child brings that fluency to the moment of reception the performance unfolds collaboratively. The former is authoritative, unidirectional, monologic, perhaps hegemonic, and integral; the latter is exploratory, collaborative, dialogic, perhaps subversive, and fragmented. The latter may be so fragmented and collaborative that one is no longer speaking of “the performance of a tale” at all: rather, the tale is invoked through metonyms and motifs and is background to the exercise of meaning-making between the television producer and the child. And familiarity with the narratives in multiple versions means that television producers often engage with parody and intertextual play, features of children’s folklore.

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**Children’s Television and Children’s Folklore**
Indeed, “play” is perhaps the most critical idea in our approach. Folklorists who study children’s folklore distinguish the materials directed at children from the culture children share among themselves. The former closely aligns with William Bascom’s ideas of folklore’s functions within a society, namely validating culture, educating, maintaining conformity, and simply being amusing (1954). It operates well in a public model of performance with a rigid division between teller and audience and the additional social relations brought to the storytelling event (parent and child being the most obvious in this case). We see as much in the following examples that we identify most closely with storytelling, where a text is presented more or less in toto from an omniscient, authoritarian voice, and it operates on a model of child as “a simple adult,” a thing to be civilized and not a subject with her own complex culture (Zumwalt 1999, 29).

The folklore children tell among themselves, however, is as much about challenging the regimented categorizations and assumptions that parents and other authorities present to them as it is about digesting and reaffirming them. Jay Mechling’s (1986) delineation of the tensions folklorists have found in children’s folklore serves us well: of hierarchy versus equality (which questions status and authority, including that given to privileged versions of a tale); of male versus female (which encourages and allows for queering of tales); of dynamism and conservatism (which builds on an initial impetus to replication and quickly moves to experimentation and recontextualization); and of order versus disorder (which subsumes the tensions before it and considers deconstruction alongside reconstruction).

We can similarly distinguish children’s television from family television. Both comprise programming intended to be suitable for watching by all ages, containing negligible references to or displays of sexuality, violence, profanity, and so forth. However, family television is produced for (early) evening viewing in prime time (typically seven to nine in the evening) with the
anticipation of a once-per-week schedule (or one-time specials and mini-series) for initial airing. With the expectation of adult viewership, it maintains a model of public performance. For example, productions like the 1965 Rodgers and Hammerstein version of Cinderella (see Sawin 2014), while suitable for all ages according to the broadcasting standards of the era, were intended as much for the adult viewer as for the child, programmed within times of leisure and ostensibly distinct from times of work (as defined by the adult male patterning of time).

Children’s television, in contrast, is intended for airing outside prime time with the presumption of an exclusively child or child-centric audience, namely on weekdays during the daytime and Saturday mornings (see Mittell 2003a). The child may be alone with the program: if adults are present they are often acting as child-minders, one of many tasks expected of them in the performance of domestic labor. Television serves both as a companion to household chores (Lull 1980) and specifically as a facilitator for child minding, in other words, the “electronic babysitter.” The same differentiation of labor that privileges and allows for a clear demarcation between work time and leisure time for those who work outside the home, while blurring that distinction for those tied to the home, occasioned what Edward D. Ives referred to as the “two traditions” (1977), a public, male, “serious leisure” performance and a personal, female, marginalized one. Whereas Ives examined the consequences of the two traditions on song and story repertoires, we note its influence on audience: if an adult male is unlikely to be present, the material is largely trivialized. Thus, children’s television, never intended for prime time, joins soap operas, game shows, and daytime talk as trivialized genres (Allen 1995; Mittell 2003b; Whannel 2004).

Yet trivialization allows for subversion, and the interpersonal performances of children’s television permit greater experimentation with the form. If “family television” echoes the
folklore directed at children, “children’s television” echoes folklore children share among themselves, beyond the adult gaze. Although of course children have no control over the televisual means of production, the increasing presence of the parodic and intertextual suggests a greater understanding of how children negotiate received texts. The use of fairy tales specifically demonstrates both conservatism and dynamism, a tendency toward creativity and the deliberate playing with forms, where the precedent becomes a framework for individual, and on occasion transgressive, performances, perhaps best exemplified by parody (Zumwalt 1999).

The tales’ very malleability coincides with the (seeming) disposability of the form, creating versions approaching the dynamism of ephemeral live storytelling as opposed to the (seeming) permanent achievement of film or printed text. We take seriously the folkloristic stance of each version of a tale being a performative storytelling event—wherein a teller draws from a received repertoire and re-creates a narrative according to the teller’s understanding of both the medium and the specific audience’s expectations at a particular time and place—to get a better sense of how the broadly encompassing category of “children’s television” negotiates and presents fairy tale despite the triviality barrier.

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**Anthology and Storytelling**

Anthologies do not suggest continuity between the protagonists from one episode to the other: each tale is presented as separate, connected through a framing device, whether a storyteller (established as such through the conventions of the program itself) explicitly structures what is to come as story and provides the televisual equivalents of opening and closing formulae and ongoing, omniscient, or a house style of animation or a repertory cast of actors. Intertextual
Referents for interpreting the tale exclude the series itself, and the story is presented in its entirety. Anthology series are analogous to a storyteller; producers select from a repertoire of narratives and present them in a particular, idiosyncratic style recognizable from story to story despite each episode’s exclusive integrity.

Nippon Animation’s *Gurimu Meisaku Gekijō* (Grimm Masterpiece Theater, 1987–1989) retold the Grimms’ and other European tales in a manner “faithful to the original storylines of these narratives, sometimes disturbingly so” (Ellis 2008, 513), bringing new content (for the Japanese audience) to the anime style of animation (see Jorgensen and Warman 2014).

Presenting “Little Red Riding Hood” in its fifth episode (1987), the producers set it in an idealized pre-modern middle European countryside. Riding Hood’s good character is shown through her instant willingness to accept the mission and warnings from her mother and her love of animals. Languorous depictions of fish in streams, rabbits in the field, and other scenes of nature highlight the animators’ skills. The Wolf constantly and unsuccessfully uses trickery to feed himself, and all the information he gathers is through overhearing the other characters. He dons Grandmother’s clothes because he cannot get away in time, and he attributes his appearance to illness. The Hunter intends to shoot the sleeping Wolf’s bloated stomach when he hears Riding Hood’s cries. He cuts the Wolf open and then sends Riding Hood for stones to fill up the now empty stomach. When Wolf awakens the weight of the stones sends him rolling down the hill. Riding Hood apologizes for not having obeyed her mother, and Grandmother forgives her.

HBO’s *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales for Every Child* (1995–2000) again took tales primarily from the Western European canon and set them in various multicultural contexts with the express intent of being more inclusive of African American, Latino, and Asian American audiences (as using variants from those groups apparently did not occur to the producers).
[The] simple idea behind the project works beautifully: Timeless stories known to all children should be opened up to speak to every child. Why not make these magical kingdoms ethnically diverse places in which all children can feel welcome? Changes are made but the tales, narrated by Robert Guillaume, remain remarkably intact.

(O'Connor 1995, emphasis added)

For its third episode (1995), the producers placed “Little Red Riding Hood” in pre-modern China and named her “Little Red Happy Coat.” Frequent and conspicuous references to stereotyped elements of Chinese culture include when she first meets the Wolf he suggests a visit to a teahouse rather than to a field to pick flowers and later when the disguised Wolf gives her pet names (“my little dumpling”/“my little eggroll”/“my little leechee nut”). Happy Coat has greater agency than the anime Riding Hood: she is inquisitive, plays with animals, and climbs trees. She volunteers to take the food to Grandmother despite her Mother’s apprehension. Her attempts to run away from the Wolf are for naught yet sufficient to allow the Herbalist—replacing the Huntsman—to arrive. The latter prepares a treatment that causes the Wolf to hiccup and belch until Grandmother and Happy Coat are freed. Happy Coat apologizes to her Grandmother, and the Herbalist, who has hogtied the unconscious Wolf, takes him far away.

Both Grimm Masterpiece Theatre (renamed Grimm’s Fairy Tale Classics when it aired in the United States starting in 1989) and Happily Ever After (1995–2000) premiered in once-a-week, primetime slots, were half an hour in duration, and fulfill their respective reputations for “disturbingly faithful” and “remarkably intact” tale renditions. The former’s fidelity is a by-product of the assumption that this is a new story for its audience; the latter’s variations from the received text are blatant and telegraphed (and, of course, the entire point of the exercise) but
nevertheless require no foreknowledge to work. Both have a remarkable authority: they are presented as wholes, within an intact universe separate from our own, with all referents internally consistent, from a responsible adult voice.

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**Parody and Subversion**

In contrast is *Wolves, Witches and Giants* (1995–1999), a ten-minute program originally created for daily syndication for ITV, narrated by Spike Milligan, who also voices all the characters. The “Little Red Riding Hood” episode’s (1995) rustic setting is interspersed with motorcars, Australian soap operas, breath spray, and electric lighting. It is “in the excitement of chasing a moose” that Riding Hood loses herself in the woods, and when the Wolf offers to carry her basket she demurs, glad that “chivalry is not dead.” The Wolf takes a short cut (by car) to the cottage and eats Granny. He grows tired of Riding Hood’s “what big hands/ears/eyes you have” verbal dueling and attacks, but he is too tangled in bedclothes to be successful. Riding Hood barricades herself in the larder and calls out a window for help: a Woodcutter, whose sandwiches the Wolf had stolen the week before, rescues her. Riding Hood skips home while eating the cake and honey, the Wolf vows to eat her one day, and Granny’s fate is unclear.

*Fractured Fairy Tales*, a recurring segment on Jay Ward’s *Rocky and His Friends* (1959–1961), created originally for daytime television, presented three “Little Red Riding Hoods.” Most approximating the Western European versions is “Ridinghoods Anonymous.” Little Red is going to sell Grandmother “a membership in the PTA” when she encounters a Wolf struggling to “kick the Ridinghood habit” by referring to his recovery handbook. Every effort to greet her amiably is met with self-defensive violence until he convinces her of his sincere efforts to quit.
He buys a PTA membership and offers to take the basket (the first of which is a decoy and explodes) but soon realizes that a Grandmother is a still-allowable lunch. Grandmother convinces him that she is a Ridinghood and Little Red the grandmother and that Ridinghoods actually sell DAR (Daughters of American Ridinghoods) memberships. Returning to the woods (with another exploding basket), he accuses Little Red of tricking him, but she shows in the handbook that grandmothers belong to the DAR. Rushing back, he poses as a photographer offering a free picture with a Shetland pony to Ridinghoods, and when Grandmother says she is in fact a grandmother he grabs her. Quick-wittedly, she says dispatches are needed at the front and he is the only one with a horse. Little Red arrives, and they feel safe having heard the basket of dispatches explode, but the Wolf somehow makes it back. He has quit Ridinghoods Anonymous and pursues them both. He believes he has lived happily ever after, as he is a member of the PTA and DAR and has acquired 200 baskets. They explode, and he ascends to heaven.

Both Wolves, Witches and Giants and Fractured Fairy Tales are gleefully irreverent toward their source material. Milligan’s vocal gymnastics and the narration of Edward Everett Horton (described by Pauline Kael as “hollow-head-under-a-top-hat” [1985, 105]), the simplistic animation, fewer concerns with narrative symmetry, and the intersection of the mundane and modern world with the storyworld in which the events occur all contribute to versions closer to how a child would tell one (see Sutton-Smith 1981). Each version has sufficient integrity to work as a story, but, rather than the solemnity of “reinterpretation,” the producers clearly aim at something closer to play. Cristina Bacchilega and John Rieder, writing on Fractured Fairy Tales, observe that the show’s frequent use of the phrase “we all know” with respect to the tale’s plot explicitly notes that this is but one of many versions known to the audience (2014, 352).
Series suggest continuity between the protagonists, and when they draw plot from fairy tales the characters within the established program narrative assume the tale roles. A number of children’s television series revolve around a set of characters engaging in imaginative play, either as the central conceit for each episode (The Backyardigans [2004–2010], Toopy and Binoo [2005–]) or as one of the possible ways they interact. Whether or not there is a specific framing device (if the characters announce to each other that they are playing) or change in landscape (if the play occurs in the found universe of established sets, such as backyards or play rooms, or if a new setting is created), the roles are selected and performed in part as a consequence of the established personalities of the show’s own storyworld, and the personalities are assumed (albeit not always fundamentally necessary) referents. The characters know that this is a story and that they are engaged in its performance.

Max and Ruby (2002–2013), an eight-minute animated program, serves both as interstitial daytime programming and, when three episodes are bundled together, as a half hour program. In “Ruby Riding Hood,” Ruby, the elder, responsible sister to the appetitive Max (who only ever says one word per segment, repeated throughout, and inevitably the last line), has packed a basket of cookies for her grandmother. After his furtive efforts at stealing them, Ruby sits Max down and tells him the story of “Little Red Riding Ruby and the Big Max Wolf”: “Remember the story of Little Red Riding Hood? [Max nods] Well, it’s exactly the same, only different.” Her version depicts Max with false ears and nose repeatedly demanding cookies from a likewise minimally costumed Ruby (dressed in a hood) as she passes the landmarks of their real neighborhood: Max/Wolf overtakes her thanks to a chat with a Woodcutter, and when she
arrives he is covered head to toe in a shawl. He reveals himself, exclaims “Cookies!” and Ruby ends her version with, “And he ate up all the cookies and Grandma didn’t get to enjoy a single one! You don’t want to be like the Big Max Wolf and eat up all of Grandma’s cookies, do you? [guilty look] I didn’t think so.” Ruby sets off for her grandmother’s, taking the same route as was shown in her story, stopping at all the same places but saying, “No Big Max Wolf here!” But Max sneaks past her, and she arrives to find him in the same shawl. She is momentarily confused, only to be interrupted by Grandma, delightedly surprised at the gift of cookies. Ruby catches on, Max reveals himself, and as there are plenty to go around they all enjoy the cookies. The show makes explicit reference to the tale as known before she reshapes the narrative to meet the specific purpose of telling it at that moment to that audience, while the animators provide its simultaneous depiction. As narrator, Ruby is an established character, one half of a social identity pairing of elder and younger sibling, a relationship brought to and informing the storytelling event (Georges 1969). The narrated version then becomes the motivating text for the enactment that comprises the second half of the segment.

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**Intertextuality**

Whereas anthologies and series present an entire narrative, however inflected by style or characterization, children’s television also uses intertextual reference, wherein knowledge of a tale type is assumed and segments, elements, or motifs can be employed alongside other narratives and forms. The children’s television staple *Sesame Street* was built on such postmodern approaches to narrative, where each episode features a “Street story” of human adults interacting with puppet characters (many of whom are nonhuman) interspersed with short
films and animations, songs, variety-show sketches, and parodies. The structure assumes and informs both an understanding of television conventions and an implicit canon of traditional narrative. Segments are repeated and incorporated over the course of the series and dubbed for non-English international versions of the show (which also feature original content).

Rarely do the televised *Sesame Street* (1969–) iterations of “Little Red Riding Hood” present a full story: producers simply assume a viewer’s familiarity with the motifs. In the show’s first twenty years Little Red Riding Hood was confined to the non-Street stories: Kermit the Frog would report on specific scenes from the story in “News Flash” segments (1974; 1988a; 1988b) or Cookie Monster would re-enact scenes in “Monsterpiece Theatre,” aping PBS’s *Masterpiece Theatre* (1994). In later decades her story entered into the Street: first, with “Grandma’s Day,” Street characters (Big Bird and Snuffleupagus) engage in imaginative play, only for one of them to momentarily forget the line between fact and fiction (Big Bird’s concern about the Wolf) followed by the surprise of indeed discovering a Wolf Grandmother (1992); later, Riding Hood and Wolf seamlessly and without explanation assume roles within the Street characters’ imaginative play (2001); and finally Riding Hood and Wolf normally interact with the Street characters when she orders a basket at the local corner store (2013).

As the show’s producers never set out to tell a complete version we can understand “Little Red Riding Hood” as a kernel narrative (*Kalčik 1975*), a story so well-known to a group that its full retelling would be superfluous and that can serve instead as a referent for common understanding and further communication. *Sesame Street* impels its viewers to bring that knowledge (along with the knowledge of its own established characters and tropes) to the performance, making them active collaborators in its creation. The presentation is not wholly esoteric: there is enough intelligibility for comprehension. But telegraphing that there are
referents that would make comprehension fuller and thus more rewarding encourages the viewer to seek them out.

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**Assumptions of Canonicity**

The use of fairy tale in children’s television demonstrates two interconnected moments in narrative canonicity: the provision of a core of texts—“here are the stories you ought to know”—and the assumption of that same core—“this will make sense because of the stories you ought to know.” We have used “Little Red Riding Hood” as our example, but we could have just as easily used “Goldilocks,” “Sleeping Beauty,” “Princess and the Pea,” or “Jack and the Beanstalk,” and little distinction is made between traditional narrative and that which has entered the public domain, such as *Kunstmärchen* and other examples from children’s literature. The assumed canonical core is framed by the biases of producers, as “ought” is inherently subjective. When *Sesame Street* attempted the Efik-Ibibio “Why the Sun and Moon Live in the Sky” (1998), it was a complete narrative, appearing to make no assumptions about established familiarity and cleaving conservatively to Elphinstone Dayrell’s version (1910) (which had been made into a popular children’s book in 1968). On the other hand, and as we discuss elsewhere in greater detail (Brodie and McDavid 2014), the children’s show *Super Why!’s* free adaptations of traditional narratives extend both to Western and non-Western alike, and the consequences of these reworked versions (of Japan’s “Momotarō the Peach Boy” and “Tiddalick the Frog” from Australian Aboriginal mythology, as but two examples) being the first and perhaps only version a child may encounter are uncertain.
Children’s television has emerged as one of the earliest introductions to fairy tale, if only as a consequence of producers basing content on public domain materials. Whether from a top-down, monologic performance of tale to performances that increasingly demand more from the child until it is a collaborative, dialogic creation, it assumes, implies, and builds a de facto canon. The repetition both of structure—through the formulaic nature of tale and of the programs themselves—and of content—through the economics of syndication and reruns—can inform not only what stories are told but how stories can be told differently, an implicit schooling in the folkloristic concepts of type and version. These texts can be integral or splintered, solemn or subversive, and mirror both the functional aspects of folklore directed at children and the experimentation of the folklore children tell among themselves.

**Related topics:** Anime and Manga; Broadcast; Pedagogy; Storytelling; Storyworlds/Narratology; Children’s and Young Adult (YA) Literature; Children’s Picture Books and Illustrations

**Notes**

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**Mediagraphy**


*Cinderella* (TV). 1965. Director Charles S. Dubin. USA.

*Grimm Masterpiece Theatre, aka Grimm’s Fairy Tale Classics* (Gurimu Meisaku Gekijō, TV).


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_Sesame Street_ (TV). 1969–. Creators Joan Ganz Cooney and Lloyd Morrisett. USA.


_Super Why!_ (TV). 2007–. Creator Angela Santomero. Canada/USA.


Ian Wojcik-Andrews (2000) makes a similar distinction between “family” and “children’s” film, the latter of which was seen as untenable in an industry without state subsidies (17). Unlike cinema, however, there is a “need” to fill television airtime. We are grateful to Naomi Hamer for bringing Wojcik-Andrews’s work to our attention.

Although new models of television distribution, including specialty cable channels with children’s programming around the clock and on-demand streaming services (that further negate the context of scheduling), have dismantled this rigid division, the patterns set up by terrestrial television (broadcast through antennae) continue to wield influence.

When the show was presented on American television, some elements of the chase scenes, the eating, the Hunter’s use of the gun, and the cutting and subsequent sewing up of the Wolf were edited out. The long scenes of nature were filled with voiceover narration.