

Tales by Moons-light: Stories from before the Great Melt

Ruthy Ballard

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Ruthy Ballard's imaginative short story collection *Tales by Moons-light* adds a modern touch to fairy tales.

The book introduces Urth, a distant planet whose stories are said to reach Earth via a time tunnel that connects the two. Urth long ago experienced a Great Melt, leaving the planet warm, with palm trees and numerous islands. It is governed by two moons that shape its culture and science (Moon studies are required courses). Its seven tales, drawn from different periods and cultures and representing characters of different ages, make it clear that the planet's people are much like the people of Earth, though they coexist with supernatural beings and animals that communicate with them through telepathy.

The stories distinguish themselves in their considerable definition and physical details, though their themes and character types evoke traditional fairy tales: a son's deformity results in inner strength; children's unlucky fortunes bring them together; a greedy father's bargain gives his daughter to a husband she cannot love. Some of Urth's teenagers have to outwit fate and unsavory adults to achieve their goals; elsewhere, characters appealing to younger readers sleep in down-filled "ducky sacks." Charming illustrations rendered in pen, ink, and wash suggest the diversity, rich colors, and beauty of Urth, its people, and its animals.

In one tale, Margie must solve three moon riddles to free herself, her brother, and other captured children in a castle. Other stories also involve kings, queens, peasants, wizards, and sorceresses. Comparisons to Earth drive the stories: Margie's riddle solving introduces concepts like lunar rotation, moon phases, and the moon's effect on gravity; some Urth terms are anagrams for Earth ones (nervas and macels are comparable to ravens and camels, and feuding countries Glanden and Usalariat relate to England and Australia). But some of the book's young characters function as observers; their parents and adults are left to carry out stories that were meant to teach moral lessons.

As the book progresses, its early innovative riddles, wordplay, and young characters' hopes and are subsumed by the concerns of older characters. In the book's final tale, about star-crossed children born in separate kingdoms that are engaged in never-ending war, the young couple is pushed offstage in favor of a consideration of the war itself, revealing that Urth's two moons caused a misunderstanding that started the war; it's a disjointed story with which to conclude the book.

Representing a mix of ages, the otherworldly fairy tales collected in *Tales by Moons-light* are imaginative and charming.

SUSAN WAGGONER (February 5, 2021)

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