

The Seed and Other Fairy Tales

Joseph Hillenbrand

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Ominous, gothic imagery and symbolism spook as Hillenbrand's prose conveys not-so-happy endings to grim fairy tales.

In this collection of nine hardcore fairy tales, which offer cautionary lessons for adults, Joseph Hillenbrand plants a seed that causes tremors in most of society's archetypes.

The first story, "The Seed," smashes the archetypal relationship between mother and child in the story of Caroline, a young girl who is watched over by a thirteen-year-old guardian ghost named Rhea. Caroline's odd mother, Hermione, insists on having a hermetic life, refusing to provide Caroline with an education, allow her to make friends, or be exposed to anything outside their run down farm. There are no photos of Caroline as a baby, just an old doll that bears her initials. It is not until Caroline's thirteenth birthday that she discovers the truth about her connection to Rhea and Hermione.

"Applebite," a story rich with biblical images and themes of religion and power, features Maggie as a thirty-something protagonist who finds herself battling for independence from a power-hungry crow when she bites into an apple and throws away the rest. The apple takes on a life of its own, creating pods of humanoid babies. When Maggie saves one of the babies, she finds herself at odds with a large crow that tries to force Maggie to accept it as her God, while questioning her life choices.

Most of Hillenbrand's stories are set in the forest, where the protagonists often meet and interact with animals. Here, he manages to contrast the atmosphere of rich, vibrant life in each story with a sense of darkness and foreboding, which heightens the impact of the endings. For example, in the very short, cautionary tale titled, "My All," a young girl's good deeds are rewarded by riches—until she meets someone who uses her kindness to his advantage.

While the stories are not always surprising, Hillenbrand's crisp writing style and graphic details keep the narrative intense and flowing, as in this description of Maggie doing battle in "Applebite:" "Crimson spoiled her hands and dripped to the stones below. She dropped the bloody twitching stump."

Detailed illustrations that evoke the story tone are vivid and effective, as seen in "Two and One," which tells of a woodcutter who saves a rabbit and is repaid with three wishes. Dividing two for him and one for his wife, the comical color illustration reveals horrified looks on the faces of the woodcutter and his wife, as their squandered wishes stare them in the face.

"Hunger Pangs," is another short tale that reveals the diverse tone and style in Hillenbrand's writing. Written in first person, the language offers no gory details or imagery, but rather a play on words as a hungry protagonist devours his feelings—literally.

The Seed and Other Fairy Tales offers intriguing adult stories with enticing protagonists, surprising twists, and reminders that the world is not always a pretty place.

MAYA FLEISCHMANN (November 6, 2013)

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