

★ **Waking Beauty: Or Eleven Stories Upon a Time****Rebecca Solnit****Arthur Rackham, Illustrator**

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Rebecca Solnit's *Waking Beauty* is a fantasy fairy tale retelling that blends feminist themes with whimsical musings.

What if Sleeping Beauty had a sister? The cursed daughter of the traditional fairy tale, Ida, falls into the prophesied slumber, leaving her younger sister Maya to continue on without her. Set in a realm where only queens rule, and where their rule is less about power and law than about using magical songs to wake the cherry blossoms every spring, the story then follows Maya. She becomes an artist in the wake of her sister's absence and discovers that her art creates magic. Freed from the tyranny of the expectations of royalty, she lives a full lifetime of her own before her sister is disenchanted.

Another tale weaves its way in as well: that of a youngest son who clings to a firebird in flight and thus makes his way to a new kingdom. The boy, Atlas, is Ida's rescuer in the most incidental sense; all the women in the tale maintain agency over their own fates. Playful and inventive in its handling of gender roles, this fairy tale mashup is surprising and delightful, inverting expectations.

Refigured illustrations by the acclaimed Arthur Rackham accompany the text, adding a whimsical layer to the verbal narrative. Solnit's afterword names the influences on her writing, from wanting to dedicate the story to a youthful family member to playing with the literary and folkloric precursors to these storytelling traditions. Many of Solnit's nods to existing stories, from *The Arabian Nights* to *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, will resonate with adults as well as younger readers.

A retold fairy tale wrapped in a fantasy cloak, *Waking Beauty* satisfies and charms with its reinvented gender roles and inventive magic.

JEANA JORGENSEN (November / December 2022)

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