A glaring anomaly stares out from the curriculum vitae of Maria Tatar, whose 10 scholarly books and scores of articles otherwise display a pleasing consistency. Her works deal with fairy tales and children’s literature: the Brothers Grimm, Bluebeard, Hans Christian Andersen. Even her first book, from 1978, on mesmerism and literature, bears an enchanted title: Spellbound.

But in 1995, Tatar, who is Loeb professor of Germanic languages and literatures, published a wild exception to this rule, digging into sensational material that is Adult with a capital A. Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany explores the vengeful underside of German national character during the 1920s. That Zeitgeist manifested itself both in lurid crimes (such as murder-rapes in which the chronology of those acts was not always clear) and in the powerful, disturbing paintings of George Grosz and Otto Dix—who sometimes “signed” his work with a blood-red handprint—as well as in Fritz Lang’s films and in plays and novels by Frank Wedekind, Hermann Hesse, and Alfred Doblin.

A decade later, similar primal feelings, less examined and controlled, helped fuel the Nazis’ organized savagery. Tatar’s passions for the Brothers Grimm and Anne Frank stayed with her, but at Princeton in the late 1960s, she discovered that both were verboten at the graduate level. “The Grimms were off limits because fairy tales were not deemed worthy of scholarly attention,” she explains, “and studying the Holocaust was taboo because it raised too many anxieties about the status of German culture in the academy.”

She redirected her attention to nineteenth- and twentieth-century German literature, studying romanticism and Weimar culture. She earned a doctorate in 1971, writing her dissertation on Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert (1780-1860), a German Romantic philosopher who delved into the “dark side of nature,” Tatar explains—subjects such as animal magnetism, the unconscious, and dreams. “You could call him a precursor of Freud,” she says. “I didn’t want to study just the good, the true, and the beautiful—which was what many of my mentors in graduate school encouraged me to do—but to inquire into human pathologies, and what leads to events like the Holocaust.”

Eventually Tatar found her scholarly calling: since the 1970s, she has focused on fairy tales. Her books include annotated editions of what she calls the “classics” (including “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “Hansel and Gretel”) and of tales collected by the Grimms, an exploration of Bluebeard, and a new edition of the stories of Hans Christian Andersen (just published by W. W. Norton, with translations from the Danish in collaboration with Julie K. Allen, Ph.D. ’05). “This field has moved from the periphery into the center of things,” Tatar explains. “Like the Holocaust,” Tatar muses. “In fairy tales, you have that same brutality and monstrousity: there’s something really primal about what is going on in these stories—and in those Weimar artists. What I admire about the Weimar artists is that they faced up to what’s inside. Fairy tales also face up to the facts of life: nothing is sacred or taboo. Meanwhile they glitter with beauty. I work at the weirdly fascinating intersection of beauty and horror.”
women’s studies, ethnic studies, or film studies, the study of childhood and its literary and material culture has attained academic legitimacy.”

Tatar began with archival work that found its way into The Hard Facts of the Grimm’s Fairy Tales (1987), which probes harsh themes like “murder, mutilation, cannibalism, infanticide, and incest.” More recently, she has moved into interpretive and empirical scholarship that examines the effects of the narratives. “Her interdisciplinarity has included psychology and psychoanalysis alongside literary history and theory,” says Porter professor of medieval Latin Jan Ziolkowski, director of the University’s Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, who has worked with Tatar on the committee on degrees in folklore and mythology.

“Maria has made an ever-deeper imprint upon the field of fairy tales, which lies at one of those all-too-rare intersections between the general public and scholars. Her elegantly written books meet the highest academic standards while remaining accessible to the endangered species known as the general reader.”

During the past academic year, Tatar was a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, on sabbatical from her faculty duties. (She also served as dean for the humanities in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences from 2003 to 2006.) At Radcliffe, she pursued her newest book project, “Enchanted Hunters: The Transformative Power of Childhood Reading,” broadening her focus from folklore to the general subject of children’s stories.

“Enchanted hunters” is a phrase from Nabokov, she explains. “It has an edge, for it applies, on one level, to Humbert Humbert and his pursuit of Lolita. But it also defines us as readers of Lolita—readers who search and explore as we fall under the spell of Nabokov’s language and his re-casting of ‘Beauty and the Beast.’ It’s no accident that many children’s books begin with bored children, like Alice on the riverbank reading a book and nodding off. How do you move from boredom to curiosity—how do you animate the child? My answer is: by using the shock value of beauty and horror.”

Fairy tales emerge from an oral tradition; they were passed down through generations by retellings long before being inscribed on paper; Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm were early folklorists. “Fairy tales should never be considered sacred texts,” Tatar says. “They existed in thousands of versions; there wasn’t one ‘Little Red Riding Hood.’”

Adults recounted these stories to a multigenerational audience, and typically the narrator spun out the tales to the rhythms of work. “We have drawings and paintings from seventeenth-century France showing fireside images of someone telling a story while others are minding children, repairing tools, or patching clothes,” Tatar says. “You’ve always got this fire. It’s a communal situation, where people are also getting warmth and comfort from the stories. The fire reminds us of the ‘ignition power’ of fairy tales, their ability to excite the imagination and to provide light in the dark. And with the fire, you also have these shadows, where fearful things might lurk. The tales not only have this magical, glittery sparkle, but also a dark, horrific side that stages our deepest anxieties and fears.”

The story itself, Tatar suggests, may be less important than the interchanges it stimulates. “In the telling, there are always inter-

“**It’s no accident** that many children’s books begin with bored children. How do you move from boredom to curiosity? My answer is: by using the shock value of beauty and horror.”
identify powerfully with the characters. Maybe that’s what raises our anxiety level about what we read to them.”

Take “Bluebeard,” the saga of a serial killer who murders six wives before getting his comeuppance. The story makes readers tremble for the seventh wife while rooting for her somehow to outwit the villain. “Bluebeard” is a marriage tale, not really a tale for kids,” Tatar explains. “Though maybe a cautionary tale for young women entering arranged marriages!”

Yet this European folktale powerfully moved an African-American child, the novelist Richard Wright, who heard a “colored schoolteacher” named Ella read it to him. “I hungered for the sharp, frightening, breath-taking, almost painful excitement that the story had given me,” Wright recalled in Black Boy, his 1945 autobiography. “He hears this story and he is transformed,” Tatar says. “He wanted to read every novel he could get his hands on. ‘I burned to know the meaning of every word,’ he said, ‘because it was a gateway to a forbidden and enchanting land.’”

Indeed. Tatar’s Secrets beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and His Wives (2004) begins, “Magic happens on the threshold of the forbidden.” Recall that Bluebeard gave his seventh wife keys to all the rooms in his mansion, but forbade her to open one remote chamber—which, of course, she does, when he is away, and so discovers the corpses of his former spouses. Fairy tales began as stories for adults, and they dig into precisely those subterranean aspects of adult life (especially family life) that so intrigue children, Tatar says. The tales have become a way to crash the grownups’ party. When the stories “migrated from the fireside to the children’s party, to the adults’ party, to the women’s party, to the men’s party, to the university,” Tatar says, “that’s the same kind of migration of fairy tales.”

The tales have become a way to “outwit the powers that be,” Tatar says. “You get this kind of preposterous violence,” Tatar says. “Take ‘Bluebeard’ in the tale recorded by the Grimms in 1819. There is a beastly stepmother who murders the protagonist of Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Red Shoes” has her feet cut off. One version of “Cinderella” has doves peck out the eyes of the evil step-sisters. These maimings can actually allay childhood fears. “Kids have a lot of anxiety about their bodily integrity,” says Tatar. “They worry about loss on so many different levels. Psychologists are right to emphasize the therapeutic value of fairy tales and how they enact and work through fears in symbolic terms. Fairy tales move in the subjunctive: ‘Once upon a time’ means that it isn’t real and that you can laugh about it in a licensed form of release.”

In her own childhood, Tatar had deeply affecting experiences as a reader. The third of four children in a Hungarian family that came to the United States in 1952 (her father was an ophthalmologist, her mother a stay-at-home parent), Tatar grew up in Highland Park, outside Chicago, in a trilingual household (her parents also spoke German). She herself reads Latin and Danish, and speaks French in addition to German.

Their home was only two blocks away from an “extraordinary library.” Tatar clearly recalls the moment when, at age nine, “I took a deep breath and crossed the threshold into the adult section—there were strict boundaries at that time. I curled up there with this book of Danish fairy tales—from the folklore collection, without illustrations. My older brother came in and told me I wasn’t allowed there. The book I treasured most was Grimm’s Fairy Tales—in German. I couldn’t read the words, but my older sister would tell me the stories.”

She learned German at Denison University in Ohio, spending her junior year in Munich; she later lived for a year in Berlin. Tatar has spent her entire career at Harvard, having joined the faculty in 1971, fresh from her doctorate at Princeton; she received tenure in 1978. (Her daughter, Lauren, graduated from Harvard in 2006 and her son, Daniel, is a senior at the College.)

Tatar’s concept of “ignition power” speaks to the way these tales can fire a reader’s imagination, and, as with Richard Wright, stimulate a child’s desire to read. She herself, having grown up with three languages, has a powerful response to the written word, in which she finds both “monumental stability and a thrilling mutability.” She recalls the “Bump!” in The Cat in the Hat—a signal for manic madness, the “logical insanity” that Dr. Seuss aimed for in that book. “Words have always felt to me like [magic]
dies at the end. Tatar explains, “Disney turns Andersen’s story—
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which Hans Christian Andersen describes the emperor’s magical
hood, the way you read as a child.”
Consider the spell cast by “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” in
which Hans Christian Andersen describes the emperor’s magical
garments: “as exquisite as cobwebs” in their pattern and design.
“The magical clothing takes over,” Tatar says, “even though it
cannot be seen.” Fairy tales stay on the surface. “Beauty is always
presented in totally abstract terms,” Tatar says. “In a description
of a princess, all you get are light and sparkle, dazzle, shine,
golden dresses and silver shoes. You never get a description of
her face. You have to use the power of your imagination.”
Then comes the Disney animated film of the story, which fills
in all the details and renders an exact image of the princess. Most of
the students in Tatar’s popular undergraduate courses, like “Fairy
Tales, Children’s Literature, and the Construction of Childhood,”
know these stories via Disney versions, and so are amazed to
learn, for example, that in Andersen’s original, the Little Mermaid
dies at the end. Tatar explains, “Disney turns Andersen’s story—
literally and figuratively—into a cartoon version of itself.”
Yet a Disney film is simply another version, another retelling,
of a narrative that already exists in countless variations. And Tatar
is quick to point out that without Disney, we might not
have these stories. “Film has an instant way of pulling you in,”
she says. “There’s intensity, there’s melodrama, and you identify
word, oral storytelling, film, and television interact with each
other, are embedded in each other, and generate new interest in
the old, as well as new versions of old stories.”
And the audience itself has changed. “Our conception of child-
hood has changed dramatically in the past couple of decades,”
Tatar says. She cites the work of French social historian Philippe
Ariès on the “invention” of childhood in the sixteenth and seven-
teenth centuries: in earlier times, children were immediately
enforced into the labor force when they were physically able
to work. In his 1982 book The Disappearance of Childhood, media
analyst Neil Postman argued that the literacy gap between adults
and children formerly allowed adults to control information and
so create a two-tiered society; when electronic media broke
down adults’ ability to control information, adult and child con-
verged. “Today, you could argue that we’re going back to the
older model,” Tatar says. “With exposure to media at early ages,
children have access to what was once adult knowledge—they
know what we didn’t know until we were teenagers. Kids seem
to be savvy about the facts of life. Yet they are still infantilized,
and more dependent on their parents than ever.”
In “Enchanted Hunters”—a project that Tatar says has been in
the works for 10 years—she examines how children interact
with stories and investigates what happens when kids migrate
into worlds that have been created by different media. Some of
her ideas have emerged from more than 300 interviews with her
students about childhood memories of their reading experience—how one student used a purple crayon (less successfully
than Crockett Johnson’s Harold) on his bedroom wall, how an-
other (very much a swan, Tatar notes) had read “The Ugly Duck-
ling” hundreds of times during adolescence, how a third tried
desperately to develop telekinetic powers after reading Roald
Dahl’s Matilda. Tatar marvels at the ways in which students ap-
proach stories: undergraduates, for example, will “read all the

Illustration (this page) by Edmund Dulac from The Nightingale
Illustration (opposite) by Warwick Goble from

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Harry Potter novels or the entire Chronicles of Narnia over a weekend, becoming effortlessly absorbed by a world they construct from nothing but black marks on a white page." The seven Harry Potter books, having sold 325 million copies in more than 60 languages, of course represent the worldwide megahit of children's literature for the past decade. Tatar draws on her scholarly expertise to account for their vast success. Author J.K. Rowling "writes for children but never down to them," she says. "[Rowling] does not shy away from the great existential mysteries: death and loss, cruelty and compassion, desire and depression. Think of those fiendish Dementors who are experts in making you lose hope—what could be more frightening than that?" Furthermore, "Rowling puts magic into the hands of children—they are the anointed and the appointed," Tatar says. "But the child, that's not so much about good and evil as about power, and Harry Potter gets the chance to defeat [arch-villain] Voldemort and to seize power. The sorcery of the books involves more than wizardry and magic, for the child has the chance to right wrongs."

In addition to the deep themes and the struggle for justice, "Rowling taps into rich literary traditions," Tatar explains. "She is a master of bricolage: recycling stories and stitching them together in vibrant new ways. Rowling is on record as declaring her favorite author to be Jane Austen, but in the Harry Potter books there is also much of Dickens and Dahl, with heavy doses of fairy tales and Arthurian legend, British boarding-school books, and murder mysteries. We have all the archetypal themes and characters of children's literature: an abject orphan, toxic stepparents, false heroes, helpers and donors, villainy and revenge."

With its staggering popularity, "Harry Potter has created a global cultural story, one that will be shared by multiple generations of literate children and adults," says Tatar. Indeed, one factor in the series' success is that the stories appeal both to adults and to younger readers.

Children's books, of course, are primarily written by adults, and much scholarship on children's literature also embodies adult viewpoints. Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim ranks among the best-known fairy-tale theorists; his 1976 book The Uses of Enchantment is a classic in the field. (Bettelheim analyzed Hansel and Gretel's attempt to take a bite from the witch's house as "oral greed.") It would take a long while to exhaust the interpretations of Turkish delight, the real-world name C.S. Lewis used for a fictional confection so pleasurable that it completely enslaves Edmund Pevensie in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.

But Tatar is trying to escape the adult perspective on children's literature. ("The psychosexual readings have become predictable," she says.) "I'm trying to capture what happens in the child," she explains. That's an ambitious goal, because children themselves are not particularly articulate on such matters, and adult recollections brim with distortions and idealizations. So Tatar also goes directly to the literary texts, mining her insights from words on the page, an admittedly speculative enterprise. This approach has led her to consider magical thinking and how stories teach children that you don't need wands—just words—to do things. The so-called classics are classics for a reason: they have powerful language, and use not just sparkle and shine but also gothic gloom to get children hooked on a story and on reading. The marvels that tumble thick and fast through these narratives lead readers to wonder not just about the world of fiction but also about the world they inhabit.

"The radical view is that it doesn't matter what story a kid reads," she continues. "In some ways, children's literature is pulp fiction: it's melodramatic. John Updike called fairy tales 'the television and pornography of their day, the life-lightening trash of preliterate peoples.' Children who read escape not just from reality but into opportunity: they learn how to navigate in the larger world; they become more connected and curious, energized by the propulsive wonders of Narnia, Oz, or Never Land."

And to wrestle with the darker aspects of life as well. Tatar's attraction to what Germans call the "night side" dates to the beginnings of her scholarly work. She recalls, with some amusement, giving a paper on the sexual-murder material that developed into Lustmord and hearing a question from a German academic: "Why always the pathological?" She has a ready answer. "It seems so much more interesting than the good, the true, and the beautiful. Trying to understand why things go wrong seems to me more productive than just focusing on what is right." Even so, she is not immune to the charms of Turkish delight, and remains as eager as the rest of us, child and adult alike, to be seduced by the beauty of a well-told story.

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