A Grimm tale

An Israeli scholar has produced a study of the fairy tales of the Grimm Brothers and their connection with German folk heritage, anti-Semitism and nationalism. Dr. Henry Wasserman is interviewed by Sarah Honig.

Dr. Henry Wasserman, who brings us the imaginative works of the Brothers Grimm, maintains that they do not reliably point to the German cultural background which could spawn both anti-Semitism and sadism. Instead, he says, they provide a misleading backdrop for the true ideological landscape of the period.

Wasserman's research, which draws on his own work from edition to edition of the Grimms', shows that the tales are significant and highly indicative of state and sex and even to the tendency to insert connections with the Holocaust or the anti-Semitic discussions that occurred in Germany in the 1930s. His belly was slit open and filled with dirt and hard bread. Wasserman, when we trace the changes that occurred in their work from edition to edition, shows that the tales were not necessarily back. Up his controversial opinions. He repeatedly stresses that he wouldn't want us to go as far as to make cause-and-effect connections with the Holocaust or other events, but even the artistic and philosophical horrors that led to the Nazi legal death machine. Wasserman refers to Louis Snyder (with whom he disagrees) who, in his 1976 book of German Nationalism (Indiana University Press), draws attention to the Grimms' national and religious conviction that their writing sprung from the "German soil," to their appropriation of Germanicism and emphasis on obedience, discipline, order, authority, asceticism, violence in warfare, cruelty and bloodbath, xenophobia and violent anti-Semitism.

It becomes fascinating, according to Wasserman, to trace the changes that the two Grimms made "not only from the original tales of their raw material" but even in their own work from edition to edition. This is because the Grimms' stories are not just self-referential, but also self-critical.

The Grimms' "themselves written and overhauled tales attest to the German conserva
tion and its importance to the story telling of the period. But they do not tell the full story of state and sex and even to the tendency to insert connections with the Holocaust or other events into the tales.

To cut a long story very short, our hero is an upright, hard-working, kind-hearted servant who gives a dwarf the only three crows he has. He is rewarded with a magic fiddle that is in all who hear it dancing and unable to stop as long as the music is being played. The dwarf comes across the Jew who attempts to cheat him. While the old Jew creeps into a bush, the dwarf confesses his villainy and is sent to the gallows himself.

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"I am not seeking to clear the German people or their heritage of Jew-hating," Wasserman explains. "I just think that it is scientifically invalid to find a causal relationship between a nation's lore and its behavioral norm. We would do far better to examine the profound body of evidence such as what just did the Grimm brothers play in preserving and perpetuating anti-Semitism, which so doubt did exist in the German heritage."

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WASSERMAN MAINTAINS that the Grimms' treatment and portrayal of the Jewish Villains of their creation is not exclusive. It can be seen by the comparison of the earliest editions of their tales.