



Fall 10-14-2005

IWU Professor Co-Authors Book Examining Politicization of Soviet Fairy Tales

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Recommended Citation

Aubry, Ann, "IWU Professor Co-Authors Book Examining Politicization of Soviet Fairy Tales" (2005). *News and Events*. 5071.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/5071>

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Oct. 14 2005

CONTACT: Ann Aubry (309) 556-3181***IWU Professor Co-Authors Book Examining Politicization of Soviet Fairy Tales***

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. –Marina Balina, professor of Russian Studies at Illinois Wesleyan University, has co-authored a compendium of Soviet folklore that examines how children's literature was turned into a political instrument during the Soviet era.

Politicizing Magic: An Anthology of Russian and Soviet Fairy Tales, published by Northwestern University Press, was co-edited by Balina and Helena Goscilo of the University of Pittsburgh and Mark Lipovetsky of the University of Colorado at Boulder.

In the book, introductory essays by Balina and her co-editors acquaint readers with the literary, historical, and political context of Russian literature under Soviet influence (from 1920-1985) – and demonstrate how Russian fairy tales reflect and interpret Soviet culture, especially in its utopian ambitions.

Balina explains that in the Soviet Union, children's literature occupied a privileged position because of its "special assignment" – the construction of a new Soviet identity. The government tried to keep a tight grip on all of Soviet literary life, and the fairy tale genre in particular was subordinated to the task of ideological transformation and education in the spirit of socialism.

The Soviet fairy tale was assigned the function of proving that current life in Soviet society was better than the wish-fulfillment common to traditional fairy tales, which glorify the ruling classes and wealth. While traditional fairy tale devices such as magic and fantasy were considered in opposition to communist values, the genre was transformed into a tool for conveying the values promoted by the Soviet system.

One example of the fairy tale as employed within Socialist Realism is the story *The Old Genie Hottabych* by Lasar Lagin, which lifted a plot from the Arabic tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*. But in this tale, when the genie Hottabych tries to fulfill the wishes of the young boy Vol'ka who becomes his master, Hottabych fails, since he operates with old assumptions that riches are the key to happiness. Since these 'old rules' do not apply to the new way of life in the Soviet Union, the old genie constantly needs to be rescued by Vol'ka.

"This reverse dependence helps to reassure the reader of the main ideological statement of the Socialist Realist fairy tale: people living within Soviet reality do not need any magic since this reality is in fact the fulfilled utopian dream," Balina explains. "Lagin shows his readers that in the opposition of old and new, old not only can understand new, but also can make every effort to adjust and embrace revolutionary changes of old morals and beliefs."

In another tale, Valentin Kataev's *The Flower of Seven Colors*, the class struggle between the hero and the villain – characteristic of earlier fairy tales – is shifted into the realm of the moral struggle within oneself. The protagonist, the little girl Zhenia, battles the enemy within: selfish and personal desires and wishes. Wrong, selfish desires are punished, but a selfless wish to help a sick boy brings joy and happiness. Yet Balina notes this tale departs from the rigid Soviet paradigm, lacking the usual class consciousness since Zhenia is helping a sick, not a socially deprived, boy.

To speak with Balina about the politicization of Soviet fairy tales, contact Jeffery G. Hanna or Ann Aubry at (309) 556-3181.