

## Book Review

*Philosophical Adventures with Fairy Tales: new ways to explore familiar tales with kids of all ages.*

Wendy. C. Turgeon

Rowman & Littlefield

168 pages

2010

Hardcover \$75, Paper, \$35, Kindle \$33 (US dollars)

---

*Review by Richard Morehouse*

---

As I began reading Wendy Turgeon's fascinating book, I found myself in the middle of a long-ago memory about a training course for teaching Junior Great Books. A group of teachers reads silently, *Jack and the Beanstalk*. We generated some questions within the rubric of the Great Book training approach, which is exploring possible meanings of the story, or what was the author's intended meaning for this specific part of the story. The question that we chose to answer was: Why did Jack climb the beanstalk the third time? As the trainer indicated, the discussion will end when we have exhausted all of the possible supportable meaning of our question. In our case, this was about 1 hour.

Going back to my opening remembrance, Wendy Turgeon's book is not about Junior Great books, what the book is about is getting young people and adults doing philosophy and using Fairy Tales as one of the ways of accomplishing that goal. With that end in mind, she presents two sections in this readable and practical guide: Section 1, Philosophy, dialogue, and Fairy Tales, and Section 2, Fairy Tales.

### **Section 1 – Philosophy, Dialogue, and Fairy Tales**

In her chapter One, "Philosophy is for kids!", Wendy Turgeon provides an overview in support of the chapter title by looking at prominent educators and philosophers who have advocated for children as philosophers: Gareth Matthews, Matthew Lipman, and Kieran Egan. Using the ideas and strategies of these philosophers and educators, Turgeon prepares the reader for helping young people explore open-ended and sometimes controversial issues. She provides a beginning answer to this issue here.

Adults and teens worry that such open questions will confuse or upset children looking for answers in certainty. And true, there are some questions that really do seek confirmation and reassurance that adults are in control and that it's alright. But as we shall see some of these most fundamental and significant human questions in our search for meaning lack that clarity and recognizable pass to THE answer that is not automatically hopeless or a bad thing (6).

Her answer to how to approach these questions is explored throughout the book.

Chapter two, "Planning a Philosophical Conversation" provides an answer to the question "What does pre-college philosophy look like?" Guideline two is to invite "a child or a group of children to have fun with philosophy! Tell them philosophy is about asking questions, exploring different answers and *looking for puzzles*<sup>1</sup>" (12). I was struck by the value of finding a puzzle. Such prompts hint at ways of thinking with young people, especially with children between preschool and elementary school. It struck me that looking for puzzles, as well as solving them, is what many children do much of the time, with or without adult hints or supervision. To engage with a puzzle is to do adult work while still being playful.

Within these guidelines, we get a sense of the poetry in Turgeon's work when she writes that it is not always important to stick fastidiously to the topic and advocates for following the discussion where children lead it. "Ideas can be like beautiful birds that start off in a bush but fly up in the sky and we follow them, forgetting about the bush. Don't worry about staying with the storyline", Turgeon tells us. She goes on to say, "This willingness to follow ideas outside the story differentiates philosophical discussions from other reading lessons" (12). These lines are among the ways that Turgeon's own adventure with fairy tales differs from discussion guides in the philosophy for children's corpus as well as Junior Great Book Discussion Guides.

Middle school and high school guidelines begin with a statement of purpose that differs only in detail from ways of leading discussion in childhood and elementary school. What I saw as the most helpful bit of advice was that the students *own* the discussion, that it is their choice of questions and their pursuit of understanding that is most valuable. The facilitator should not be too concerned about how long the discussion should last or when it should end (14).

Some things that may help make for a richer discussion includes asking for examples and definitions, distinguishing between descriptions and prescriptions. As students learn to use deductive and inductive logic any disputed outcome may be resolved or set aside for later discussion. "What ifs" and counterarguments may also open new avenues for fruitful discussion. As facilitators, we must be open to all responses. We simultaneously should be aware that all assertions are not equally acceptable or well supported. Evidence and reasons matter (15).

Turgeon includes in this chapter questions for debriefing. These questions are (1) what did we discover? (2) what questions remain for us to continue to ponder? (3) did we listen to one another

---

<sup>1</sup> My emphasis

with respect? (4) did we offer reasons for what we said? (5) did we explore facts and values? (6) did everyone get a chance to offer his or her view? Taken together they provide both a summary of progress and a potential sense of confidence for the work completed.

Chapter three provides a breezy but informative overview of the history and uses of fairy tales. An informative and insightful bit of new information for me was that “Mother Goose” was a way that some German families referred to their children’s Nany. Turgeon provides a helpful overview of the history of fairy tales with “getting into the weeds” of academic disputes. This chapter sets the table for the delicious meal of using fairy tales as discussion starters, the main course meal as well as dessert.

## Section 2 – Fairy Tales

Twelve fairy tales are presented in separate chapters (6 -17). This is the largest part of the book and makes up 127 pages of a 169 paged book, that is, 75 % of the book is the how-to guide. Wendy Turgeon’s choice to allot such a large portion of the book to examples that can be implemented in the classroom seems appropriate especially for readers who are actively involved in Philosophy for Children (P4C).

All of these chapters are organized in the same format. They begin with Plot and move forward with Targeting Age Level<sup>2</sup>, Reading Plan, and Themes. Under each theme, there are a different set of Discussion Questions, and Activities or Projects. The number of themes varies between as few as three to as many as seven. My original thought was to choose several stories and present the readers with an overview of those chapters. As I began writing about the first fairy tales lesson plan, I realized that the best I could accomplish was a poorly done re-doing in a shorter version of what Turgeon had already done well in a somewhat longer lesson plan. This approach would have also deprived the reader of the joy of discovering for her or himself the rich experience of a first encounter with Turgeon’s insightful approach to fairy tales.

Readers who are not familiar with the P4C literature might benefit from looking at Appendix A provided by Turgeon, ‘More information about Philosophy and Children’. Some things the reader might overlook but are important include the second page of the introduction where Turgeon invites the reader to look at the Appendixes. Each appendix provides helpful material for using the lesson plans or enriching our understanding of methods and content. Perhaps most valuable is the list of books she cites regarding the philosophical underpinning that Turgeon draws on explicitly and implicitly as she constructed the lessons for this work. Unfortunately, in this reviewer’s opinion, she neglects to include one of the works of Kieran Egan. While there are many of Egan’s works that could enhance understanding for conducting a philosophically oriented approach to fairy tales, I would recommend his *An imaginative approach to teaching* (2005). The reader should not overlook the illustration which begins chapters in Section 2. The illustrations are by Alice Gerhardstein and might provide a unique opportunity for discussion.

---

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes Targeting and Reading Level is integrated into Reading Plan and sometimes each heading has its own paragraph.

The reader will be much aided by looking at “Some notes on Sources.” These last pages (167-168) of the book were of great value to this reviewer as they provide a place to find the original stories. While many of us grew up reading the Brothers Grim and Hans Christian Andersen, we may not have read Maria Ratar’s version of *Beauty and the Beast* or *Cinderella* and are even less likely to have read her versions of Maria Tatar’s *Fisher’s Bird*, *White snake* or the *Seven Ravens*.

Turgeon’s *Philosophical Adventures* is an exciting invitation and a practical tool for discovering and re-discovering twelve fairy tales and provides a roadmap for teachers and parents in ways to engage students. Wendy Turgeon’s book is readable and comprehensive yet not overwhelming. It is a welcome addition to the literature on teaching kids as they engage ideas in a new and deeper way. I found myself occasionally wishing that she would go deeper or provide more specific connections to philosophy, but on contemplation, I realized that Turgeon was not writing for me, but for the many teachers and parents who could enrich themselves and the children who will be exposed to fairy tales and philosophy in new ways. I am glad she wrote *Philosophical Adventures* for them.

*Address Correspondences to:*

Richard Morehouse

Emeritus Professor of Psychology, Viterbo University

Email: [remorehouse@viterbo.edu](mailto:remorehouse@viterbo.edu)