

Tales for adult children?

Hanna Krall's
Co się stało z naszą bajką
[What happened to our
fairy tale]

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Mariusz Szczygieł, reflecting on the role of the protagonist in a reportage, wrote that “there are many editors who won’t greenlight reporters’ stories unless they have distinctive, interesting, and emblematic protagonists.”¹ Szczygieł notes that this rule does not apply to literary reportage. Life can resemble fiction, and fiction can resemble life. In “non-fiction, the protagonist is not required to shape destiny; [...] literary reportage is not a genre governed by strict rules.”² Hanna Krall often stressed in interviews that her aim was to tell true stories.³ “Reportage is an account of what really happened, and everything

¹ Mariusz Szczygieł, *Fakty muszą zatańczyć* [Facts must dance] (Warsaw: Dowody, 2022), 235–236.

² Szczygieł, 238.

³ *Reporterka. Rozmowy z Hanną Krall* [Reporter. Conversations with Hanna Krall]. Selection, composition, supplementation, and documentation by Jacek Antczak (Warsaw: Marginesy, 2007), 49.

I write about really happened,”⁴ she confessed. At the same time, she acknowledged that language can never be entirely objective.⁵ Many of the stories she recounted seemed “hard to believe,”⁶ yet she meticulously followed the “significant details”⁷ of her subjects’ lives over many years, recording and preserving narratives that, to her readers, often read like fiction. This makes Krall’s foray into fiction all the more intriguing. She attempted only once to write specifically for young readers: *Po bajce* [After the fairy tale] is a short play published in issue 4 of *Scena* [Stage] in 1987. The work won third prize in a youth theater competition, was staged several times, and then quickly slipped into obscurity.⁸ Drawing on classic Brothers Grimm tales, Krall explored the theme of narrative exhaustion, imagining fairy-tale characters who have grown weary of endlessly repeating their prescribed roles. The Big Bad Wolf, Baba Yaga, and the Two Ugly Stepsisters are tired and overworked; they abandon their fairy tales, leaving the “heroes” without the villains. As Magdalena Bednarek observes, reworking the plots of fairy tales and fables is hardly new,⁹ yet Hanna Krall’s approach presents a particular challenge for readers. She disrupts the familiar structure of the classic children’s story, compelling reflection on the role of evil in the world. Initially published in a magazine, the short play went largely unnoticed. Seven years later, Krall revised and republished it, introducing significant changes—most notably a new title. The original title, *Po bajce* [After the fairy tale], suggested closure: it pointed either to events unfolding beyond the story once the reader had finished, or to the definitive end and disappearance of the fairy tale itself. In the 1994 edition, Krall removed the stage directions, transformed the dialogue-driven text into a continuous narrative, and retitled the work. *Co się stało z naszą bajką* [What happened to our fairy tale], as Zofia Beszczyńska observed, was published by *Twój Styl*, and its deluxe collector’s edition received an honorary IBBY award for both text and illustrations. “Indeed, they are unique—so unique that the critic might feel helpless when confronting both the text and the images,”¹⁰ one reviewer remarked. The book featured twelve full-page illustrations by Maria Ekier.¹¹ As Joanna Olech noted, “[t]he

⁴ Reporterka. Rozmowy z Hanną Krall, 44.

⁵ “When describing people, when describing events, one always describes something more than the literal event.” Reporterka. Rozmowy z Hanną Krall, 47.

⁶ Reporterka. Rozmowy z Hanną Krall, 25.

⁷ “That war destroyed the worlds that once existed in Poland. When the worlds ceased to exist, they disappeared after the war. The world of officers and knights, the world of courts [...], the Jewish world, the world of the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie, they all disappeared. And significant details remain as remnants. They are proof that the worlds existed.” Wydawnictwo Literackie, “Szczegóły znaczące” – Hanna Krall w Nowym Teatrze [“Significant details” – Hanna Krall at Nowy Teatr], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HG2DBDfxJg4>, date of access 30 Feb. 2024.

⁸ See notes and reviews in Encyklopedia Teatru [Encyclopedia of Theatre], <https://encyklopediaateatru.pl/sztuki/9277/po-bajce>, date of access 30 Feb. 2024.

⁹ Magdalena Bednarek, Baśni przeobrażone. Transformacja bajek i baśni w polskiej prozie po 1989 roku [Transformed fairy tales: The transformation of fairy tales and fables in Polish prose after 1989] (Poznań: Adam Mickiewicz University Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Zofia Beszczyńska, “Ucieczka od bajki” [Escape from a fairy tale], Nowe Książki [New books] 2 (1995): 60.

¹¹ Zofia Ożóg-Winiarska states that the “International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) award is [...]” the most distinguished award for children’s books. National sections award a book of the year prize and an illustrator prize. *Co się z naszą bajką* received a literary award in 1994, and Maria Ekier was recognized twice for her illustrations: in 1994, she received a distinction from the Polish Section of IBBY, and in 1999, she received an award at the The Biennial of Illustration Bratislava (BIB). See: Zofia Ożóg-Winiarska: “IBBY. Nagrody za twórczość dla dzieci i młodzieży” [IBBY Awards for Books for Children and Young People], in: Literatura dla dzieci i młodzieży (po roku 1980), vol. 2, ed. Krystyna Heska-Kwaśniewicz (Katowice: University of Silesia Publishing House, 2009).

characters have the faces of sad Pierrots, and the Big Bad Wolf looks like a stray dog. The touching illustrations capture the dark and enigmatic nature of the fairy tale.”¹² The revised title, too, underscores this sense of ambiguity. The question it poses—what happened to the fairy tale—suggests not its total destruction, but rather its transformation in the wake of some unnamed event. The change of title passed largely unnoticed, and the fact that Krall’s fairy tale had first appeared as a play titled *Po bajce* was soon forgotten. Yet the new title invited different associations. As Marta Rusek observes:

This is “our” fairy tale; emphasis is placed on communal storytelling. Since we acknowledge that fairy tales have an archetypical dimension, the question posed concerns our own story, that is, the story told by humans about human fate: what is it like? Has it changed? Has its model been exhausted? Does it still have the value/power to shape the world?¹³

In his review of Wojciech Kobrzyński’s 1992 production—transformed from a play into a fairy tale¹⁴—Andrzej Ponowa wrote

The villains no longer wish to devour children, speak in rhyme, or serve as cautionary examples. Their rebellion unsettles the very foundations of the traditional fairy tale, whose structure collapses once its characters refuse their assigned roles and set out in search of a gentler, more peaceful story.¹⁵

When the villains rebel, the structure collapses, and this collapse is the main theme of the play:

[...] The play asks: “what, exactly, happened to our fairy tale?”... Doesn’t this, by any chance, imply a question about our world; the whole world? The world of our feelings? The world of ideals? The world of our heroes? One of the actors, by the way, says that there are four heroes and four villains in the play. But... Who is... who?¹⁶

This text is neither a fairy tale (as one character reminds readers, in fairy tales people speak in rhyme), nor entirely not a fairy tale (since everyone has encountered a narrative fairy tale at least once). It is not a fable—though it draws inspiration from the Brothers Grimm and is often described as such—nor is it a play. As a result, it resists easy classification. But who,

¹²Joanna Olech, “Co się stało z naszą bajką?” [What happened to our fairy tale], The Polish Section of IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People), http://www.ibby.pl/?page_id=258, date of access 1 Apr. 2024.

¹³Marta Rusek, “(Roz)poznawanie? Baśnie w odbiorze uczniów” [Recognizing/discovering? Fairy tales as perceived by students], *Filoteknos* 10 (2020): 257.

¹⁴Co się stało z naszą bajką (Hanna Krall), Białystok Puppet Theatre, premiere 24 Oct. 1992, directed by Wojciech Kobrzyński, set design by Ireneusz Salwa, music by Krzysztof Dzierma, <https://encyklopediateatru.pl/przedstawienie/5678/co-sie-stalo-z-nasza-bajka>, date of access 26 Mar. 2024.

¹⁵Roman Pawłowski, “Mistrzowie i uczniowie” [Masters and students], *Kurier Poranny* [Morning Courier] 229 (1992), <https://encyklopediateatru.pl/artykuly/208860/mistrzowie-i-uczniowie>, date of access 26 Mar. 2024.

¹⁶Andrzej Ponowa, “Co się stało?” [What happened?], *Gazeta Współczesna* [Contemporary Newspaper] 209 (1992), <https://encyklopediateatru.pl/artykuly/208858/co-sie-stalo>, date of access 26 Mar. 2024.

then, is its intended audience? The form and theme of the work were less ambiguous. Joanna Papuzińska advised parents to “hide this philosophical tale¹⁷ in a closet and only take it out to read to children on appropriate occasions and in the right mood. Then the book will last for a long time, and the child, rereading it from time to time, will discover new meanings as they grow up.”¹⁸ After all, it was a demanding, complex text, issued only in a limited, deluxe edition.¹⁹ Zofia Beszczyńska complained in her review that this book, “which is at least theoretically addressed to children,” “is difficult to read; it should not be so serious, let alone so sad.”²⁰ A fairy tale without a happy ending is surprising:

The premiere audience was hardly ideal. It consisted mostly of adults—connoisseurs, specialists, a few friends, and family members. And the children? There were some, too. I asked them: WHAT HAPPENED TO OUR FAIRY TALE? But the children remained silent—perhaps they did not know. The play offered no ready-made moral lesson; it was unsettling, demanding thought and the search for answers. There was no happy ending. That, in itself, was extraordinary.²¹

According to adults, children are not the intended audience for this story; they must first be prepared for it.²² Yet it is worth asking whether young readers truly struggle with the text, or whether this difficulty is merely projected by adults unsettled by the absence of a happy ending. For them, the story is so disturbing that they register its conclusion with a kind of relief: “[...] A post-traumatic worldview drove the narrative to the brink of annihilation, erasing the world of fairy tales along with their familiar value judgments. **Fortunately**, some children, intuiting this hidden design, supplied their own resolution—**imagining a happy ending where none had been offered.**”²³ A more optimistic interpretation of the play’s ending brought adults a sense of relief. Piotr Adler chose to alter the original ending, which was deliberately ambiguous and resisted an unequivocally positive reading. In his staging at Mr. Hilary’s Academy of Arts, the children in the audience were offered a “surprise at the end.” The actors broke the fourth wall, calling out: “We’re going to present a different ending, children—what do you think?”²⁴ Adler’s production thus introduced a happy ending. What prompted this decision? Was the fairy tale, perhaps, too realistic? The paradox is striking: Krall’s reportages are often criticized as too “fairy-tale-like” and

¹⁷ Joanna Papuzińska, “Demontaż bajki i kuma śmierci” [Dismantling the fairy tale and Godfather Death], *Guliwer* [Guliver] 1 (1995): 11.

¹⁸ Papuzińska, 12.

¹⁹ The book was issued in a limited edition of 1,000 copies, presented as a booklet in a cardboard folder and accompanied by 12 illustrations by Maria Ekier.

²⁰ Beszczyńska, 60.

²¹ Ponowa.

²² Marta Rusek, in collaboration with two primary school teachers, conducted a study with children aged 9–11. The teachers found that reading the fairy tale required a careful introduction, “since Krall’s text—because of its length and intertextual references—might be difficult for the students to grasp in its entirety. To aid comprehension, they divided the work into sections, pausing whenever the children identified a familiar fairy-tale character or plot.” Rusek, 261.

²³ Rusek, 264. Emphasis mine, E.B.

²⁴ Co się stało z naszą bajką? Teatr Niezbedny V2, directed by Piotr Adler, available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=KemfUOQ9jG0>, date of access 30 Mar. 2024.

improbable,²⁵ while her fairy tale is judged too realistic, insufficiently “fairy-tale-like.” In an interview with Jacek Antczak, Krall explained:

Everything we see in TV shows, music videos, and horror films is fake. Fake fear, fake death. But in the stories I tell, there’s real death, real fear, real courage. Perhaps readers are tired of made-up stories, simple truths, and perhaps they want to be confronted with unanswered questions.²⁶

The reception of *Co się stało z naszą bajką* suggests that readers are far from weary of such invented tales. Framed in the guise of a fairy tale, the story provokes a sense of “real fear:” what if the fairy-tale characters were to “really” die? A sharper, more unsettling question arises—but only adult readers, familiar with Krall’s literary concerns, are equipped to pose it:

It is no coincidence that I recall here a short story for children by the author of *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem* [Shielding the flame]. [...] Yet it is difficult to deny that Krall’s tale—by a writer renowned for her Holocaust narratives—is itself also a Holocaust story. I read it not so much through the lens of “liquid modernity” as through a vision of the contemporary world, held back from ultimate disintegration only by the fear of death. We pause, holding our breath, before extinguishing the candle. The ending echoes the now-classic metaphor of rebellion that Krall employed in *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem*. But whereas in that work life was cherished above all else, here it no longer carries the same weight.²⁷

Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, in her reflections on children’s narratives addressing death and the Holocaust, argued that Hanna Krall’s book should not be given to young readers; the shadow of the Holocaust, she noted, is simply too overwhelming. Inevitably, associations with Holocaust narratives arise. In 2011, *Co się stało z naszą bajką* appeared in a new edition. The earlier collector’s version was replaced by a volume in Krall’s *Collected Works* series, published by Świat Książki. This edition brought together three texts: *Co się stało z naszą bajką*, *Król kier znów na wylocie* [Chasing the King of Hearts], and *Różowe strusie pióra* [Pink ostrich feathers]. Although the volume concludes with the short fairy tale, its title dominates the cover, printed in larger type than the other two works. The back cover also features an excerpt from the fairy tale:

²⁵ Marta Cuber (Tomczok) recalls Stefan Chwin’s findings: he described “Hanna Krall’s books [...] as the ‘gilded’ prose about the Holocaust, characterized by the themes of miraculous survival and familial emotionality” (p. 39). The scholar further notes that “in *Różowe strusie pióra* [Pink ostrich feathers], [the text] relegates the Holocaust to a marginal perspective, juxtaposing it with scenes of everyday life or with events that appear absurdly incongruous. One of the protagonists, Katarzyna G., wrote to Krall in 2002 and asked about the sadness found in *To ty jesteś Daniel* [You are Daniel]: ‘Is it even possible to write about the smell of basil in Canadian supermarkets after the Holocaust?’ In 2009, Hanna Krall challenged the rhetoric of distance and drama. She managed to silence the Gorgon, restore scents and flavors to the world, and maintain discretion” (p. 52). Marta Cuber, “Od stosowności do dosadności. Wokół przemian polskojęzycznej prozy o Zagładzie w latach 1989–2009” [From appropriateness to explicitness. On the transformations of Polish Holocaust prose, 1989–2009], in: Marta Cuber, Metonimie Zagłady. O polskiej prozie lat 1987–2012 [Metonymy of the Holocaust. Polish prose, 1987–2012] (Katowice: University of Silesia Publishing House, 2013), 39, 52.

²⁶ Reporterka. Rozmowy z Hanną Krall, 51.

²⁷ Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, W(y)czytać Zagładę. Praktyki postpamięci w polskiej literaturze XXI wieku dla dzieci i młodzieży [Reading the Holocaust. Postmemory practices in 21st-Century Polish literature for children and young adults] (Katowice: University of Silesia Publishing House, 2016), 166–167.

“This dress used to be so much more beautiful,” Cinderella murmured thoughtfully. “I don’t know what became of it. And what became of the Stepsisters? Of the ashes? What has happened to our fairy tale?”

A cry suddenly rose from every corner of the forest:

“What happened to our fairy tale?!”

Gretel, Hansel, Cinderella, and even the old goat called out together. Then the wind—an infamous gossip who hears and knows everything—rustled through the trees and whispered loudly:

“Your fairy tales are no more... You can step out of them... Come closer... There are no fairy tales...²⁸

To believe that every story can end happily is unthinkable in a world marked by the Holocaust. By adopting the fairy-tale form, Krall constructs a metatextual reflection directed at the readers of her reportages—readers who often overlook that *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem* [Shielding the Flame] provides a profound “educational lesson for schoolchildren”²⁹ and reminds us that childhood is not invariably a time of joy.

On January 18, 1945, freedom, so to speak, began for me. And so they sang: “Oh, it doesn’t matter / that the wounds hurt so much, / for how sweet it is now to go / to those heavenly glades...” It was sweet to go out into the snow. Into the sun. It was sweet to know that the war was over, that I had survived the war. How old was I? Nine and a half years old. I was a grown man.³⁰

“Children of war must be wise and mature,”³¹ and they are not the only ones. Krall placed her trust in young readers. “I love meeting young people, and if we are earnestly talking about accomplishments, this is my greatest achievement,” she remarked in an interview.³² It is only adults, bound to traditional yet now degraded norms, who may harbor doubts about the book. As an allegorical, meta-literary tale, *Co się stało z naszą bajką* holds up a distorting mirror to the readers of Krall’s prose. The Big Bad Wolf has “ruined his stomach by eating baby goats and grandmothers,”³³ while Baba Yaga is “bored” by the endless repetition of her role. Both abandon their stories to wander into other fairy tales. Their absence—like that of the Two Ugly Stepsisters—disrupts the lives of characters traditionally cast as heroes. The “villains” must return if the “heroes” are to act at all. In this sense, the story exposes the radical relativism of values. Marta Rusek noted that “the Big Bad Wolf [...] understands that fairy tales are schematic and conventional. After all, he ironically states: ‘This is what undoes us: a sense of duty. We are the villains, but we want to fulfill our duty.’”³⁴ This statement has a deeper meaning. The characters believe that their behavior—regardless of whether it is considered good or evil—is appropriate because it is determined by something more important. The only character who defies this rule is Baba Yaga. Moreover, only her tale is told to the end. Magdalena Bednarek writes:

²⁸Hanna Krall, *Co się stało z naszą bajką. Król kier znów na wylocie. Różowe strusie pióra* [What happened to our fairy tale. Chasing the king of hearts. Pink ostrich feathers]. (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2011).

²⁹Mariusz Szczygieł, Wojciech Tochman, Krall (Warsaw: Dowody, 2015). The book has no pagination.

³⁰Szczygieł, Tochman.

³¹Reporterka. *Rozmowy z Hanną Krall*, 11.

³²Reporterka. *Rozmowy z Hanną Krall*, 130.

³³Krall, *Co się stało z naszą bajką*, 311.

³⁴Rusek, 258.

As Propp observed, Baba Yaga represents a remnant of initiation mysteries, serving as the master of initiation (a role also hinted at in the etymology of the word “witch”). Krall recalls one of the strangest fairy tales—one in which the protagonist, unusually, suffers defeat; where cunning brings no reward, where poverty and youth offer no advantage, and where no leniency is granted. [...] Godfather Death, at first a positive character, ultimately reveals himself to be the antagonist—perhaps that is why Baba Yaga calls this story a “truly beautiful fairy tale,” for here the antagonist prevails. Unlike conventional tales governed by the law of the happy ending, this story is ruled by a harsher principle: simple justice, in which evil—deception and theft—is punished. From this perspective, Godfather Death may be seen as an anti-fairy tale.³⁵

Let me add that Krall’s reinterpretation of *Godfather Death* does not presuppose the triumph of justice. Baba Yaga—who appears as Baba Yaga-Death in another tale—summarizes the first part of the Grimms’ fairy tale, saying that “she will tell you what happened next” when the circumstances allow it. Her choice to continue the tale depends on the characters’ actions. Baba Yaga emerges as the driving force of the entire narrative: she conceives the idea that it is worth exploring what unfolds in other stories, and she quietly shares this plan with the characters she encounters: “Has it never occurred to you not to try on the slipper?,” Baba Yaga smiled. This surprised both Stepsisters. [...] ‘That’s enough,’ Baba Yaga decided. ‘We shouldn’t waste time complaining, we have a plan...’³⁶ More bored characters join Baba Yaga in her quest to destroy classic fairy tales, and although it seems like they might succeed, the characters’ sudden and justified rebellion dies down:

At this point, the Big Bad Wolf could no longer restrain himself and burst into a harsh, grating laugh.

“And who are you going to save now?” he jeered at the Goat.

“You’d better get on with your supper—the grass is already withering,” the Stepsisters chimed in. The Goat turned her head toward the voices but saw no one; the junipers concealed them completely. “Alas, my dear,” Baba Yaga entered the scene, “you are no longer a heroic mother. You’re nothing more than an old goat...”

“And from a dull fairy tale, at that!” the Stepsisters added. “A tale of a Goat who goes out to eat grass and returns. Tell us—do you know a single child who would want to hear such a story?”

It was Baba Yaga who first silenced them.³⁷

There can be no “heroes” without “villains.” A goat who fails to protect her young—neither good nor evil—becomes a dull and lifeless figure. Krall, with irony, holds up a distorting mirror to the reader: real life, stripped of sudden upheavals, resists the very shape of storytelling. The interlocutors in Hanna Krall’s narratives of the Holocaust and the War often reflect on the function of storytelling in much the same way as characters in fairy tales do:

“This novel is terribly short, Ms. Krall,” she said abruptly. “It was meant to be a long book, but it turned out to be just a booklet.”

³⁵Bednarek, 113.

³⁶Krall, *Co się stało z naszą bajką*, 315.

³⁷Krall, *Co się stało z naszą bajką*, 316.

"It should be that way," I replied. "The book about Marek Edelman was even shorter. It was sixty pages shorter—one third shorter. And that was a book about the ghetto insurgents..." "It was all so dreadful," she went on, as if she hadn't heard me. "My despair, my heart, my tears. And what do we have in your book? Just a few sentences—and that's all?" "The greater the despair," I answered, "the fewer sentences are needed, Ms. R."³⁸

Izolda R. from *Hipnoza* [Hypnosis] demands greater drama, as does the editor preparing the volume for publication: "I have only one comment," she said. 'A compositional one. Shouldn't the husband have abandoned her earlier? It would have been much better for the story."³⁹ Indeed, it might have been better for the story—and better, too, for the fairy tale, had the "villains" remained. This very thought prompts Baba Yaga to continue her tale: "Tired of fairy tales in which nothing ever happened, they listened instead to Baba Yaga's strange story about a poor man who invited Death to be Godfather to his child."⁴⁰ Yet for the Big Bad Wolf, Cinderella, the Stepsisters, and the other characters, the moral of *Godfather Death* remains elusive.

"And what happened next?" asked Cinderella, leaning forward, intent on the story.
 "As always," came the reply. "The man tried to deceive Death. He gave the herb to the young, beautiful princess, even though the Godfather stood at her feet. And so he had to be punished."
 "Shouldn't we step into that fairy tale at once?" the Big Bad Wolf broke in.
 "Why?" Baba Yaga asked, startled. "What would you change?"
 "I'll make Death leave."
 "Why? He gave his godson a marvelous gift—a healing herb."
 "Then I'll make the godson leave."
 "He only wanted to save his beloved princess."
 "But he betrayed Death."
 "Out of love..."
 "Tell me," the Big bad Wolf pressed, "is it possible for a fairy tale to hold neither good nor evil?"⁴¹

The desire to enter this fairy tale is driven by the conviction that something is wrong with it, too. The characters' doubts and discussion resemble another dialogue, from *Tam już nie ma żadnej rzeki* [There is no river there anymore]:

"And what then?" the director asked.
 "Nothing. A film would have to be made, that's all."
 "About what?"
 "About Grandma Waleria. About uncles and aunts, a handsome brunette, the gardener Onufry, frozen trees, swallows, and a grandson."
 "I mean—what is the film about?"
 "About Grandma Waleria, uncles, trees..."

³⁸Hanna Krall, "Hipnoza" [Hypnosis], in: Hanna Krall, *Fantom bólu. Reportaże wszystkie* [Phantom of pain. Collected reportages], introduction by Mariusz Szczygieł (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2024), 299.

³⁹Krall, "Hipnoza", 302.

⁴⁰Krall, *Co się stało z naszą bajką*, 319.

⁴¹Krall, *Co się stało z naszą bajką*, 319.

“But what is it really about? About punishment? About chance? About God?”

“I don’t know. It was your schoolmate who used to say: my job is not to know.”⁴²

Hanna Krall proves in *Co się stało z naszą bajką* that a black-and-white world can only exist in fairy tales, perhaps only in some of them. Baba Yaga will not permit her companions the comfort of a simple, or simplistic, view of reality:

[...] You always like the good guys. “Sometimes I don’t know what to be good even means,” Baba Yaga repeated the sentence they had just heard, and the “good guys” blushed. Hansel and Gretel recalled their gluttony, Cinderella remembered her vanity...⁴³

Leading her companions on a journey through other fairy tales, Baba Yaga seeks to teach them a lesson through story. Yet just as swiftly as the characters recognize and admit their flaws, they just as swiftly forget them. Tearing apart the very tales from which they are meant to draw meaning ultimately leads nowhere.

“You must understand,” the Goat broke the silence. “If evil is necessary in fairy tales, then someone must be evil. Someone must play the villain in every story. And we are grateful that you agreed to take on that role.”

“Goat,” the Big Bad Wolf replied, “you lived your whole life in fear of us. We terrified you. We devoured you. And now we offer you a chance—you could live in peace.”

“Live in peace?” the Goat echoed. “Without sorrow? How can you be so sure that peace is what we truly want?”

“You sound strange, Goat,” the Big Bad Wolf said, taken aback. “Not like a Goat at all.”

“But what you say is beautiful,” the Stepsisters whispered. “Speak, Goat—speak.”

“We must embrace everything that is given to us,” the Goat continued. “All the joy, but also all the sorrow. We must not turn away from it. And even if we try, it will do us no good. The sorrow we refuse to face will one day find us anyway.”

“This is the first time I’ve heard anyone ask for such things—for sorrow... for fear...”⁴⁴

The Goat and the other characters yearn to return to their fairy tales, unaware that their desires are nothing more than empty formulas—at once “strange” and unsettling. For them, the beauty of words matters more than their meaning. The Goat’s “beautiful” speech becomes a kind of justification for what they ultimately want: the characters insist that “they have no right to alter the fairy tales; they must remain as they are, forever.” Their exchange is abruptly broken off by Baba Yaga, who once again turns to the story of *Godfather Death*. The words—“Death grew angry and addressed his godson [...]”⁴⁵—are true both for Death and Baba Yaga. She cannot listen to her companions. Leading them into a cave, she commands:

⁴²Hanna Krall, “Tam już nie ma żadnej rzeki” [There is no river there anymore], in: Hanna Krall, *Fantom bólu. Reportaże wszystkie*, 747.

⁴³Krall, *Co się stało z naszą bajką*, 320.

⁴⁴Krall, *Co się stało z naszą bajką*, 321.

⁴⁵Krall, *Co się stało z naszą bajką*, 322.

“These are your lives,” said the Baba Yaga-Death. “The lives of animals, the lives of people...”

“And of goats?” the Goat whispered.

[...]

“Listen,” the Goat murmured. “Couldn’t you light a taller candle for me? I’d like to live a little longer.”

“Alas,” the Baba Yaga-Death replied, “each creature is given only one candle—no more, no less. But I am surprised it is you who asks, Goat. You, whose days have been steeped in sorrow and fear...”

“Because I love sorrow, and I love life,” the Goat confessed. “Look—I accept every kind of fear, every wolf. So give me a taller candle, won’t you?”⁴⁶

Potential danger and narrative harm are easy enough to accept. The Goat may deliver “beautiful” speeches about the necessity of suffering and evil—so long as they do not touch her directly. Yet outside the plot, beyond the frame of the story, one truth remains: death is relentless and spares no one. Until the very end, Baba Yaga-Death strives to make the characters grasp the true value of life—something far more important than the mere beauty of the tale itself. “It is never quite proper to write eloquently about horrors, yet without form I would drown in a pit of corpses.”⁴⁷ Agata Tuszyńska observed that Hanna Krall “does not fear that the need to tell and the need to listen are vanishing. It is a need akin to hearing a fairy tale—except that the devouring of Little Red Riding Hood must truly take place.”⁴⁸ In *Co się stało z naszą bajką*, Baba Yaga, driven to the edge of despair, threatens the characters with death in order to make them grasp her story. The Big Bad Wolf, Hansel and Gretel, the Princess, and the other fairy-tale figures behave much like readers of reportage, in which—as Wiesław Kot remarked—“the documentation of individual life is complicated by the fact that the wartime biographies of Jews so often border on the improbable. [...] At times this confusion approaches absurdity, which, however, proves to be an element of historical truth.”⁴⁹ Hanna Krall’s reportages often unsettle and bewilder readers, which is why Michał Cichy describes them as “documentary fairy tales.”⁵⁰ Marta Rusek observes that the characters refuse to believe Baba Yaga-Death: “Instead of joining the *danse macabre*, they long to dance at a wedding and blow out the candles on a birthday cake—bidding farewell to what has passed and ushering in a new beginning.”⁵¹ Readers respond in much the same way: they yearn to hear the truth, yet still crave a version shaped into a story with a happy ending. This tension renders Baba Yaga-Death’s cry all the more haunting and terrifying:

⁴⁶Krall, *Co się stało z naszą bajką*, 232.

⁴⁷Reporterka. Rozmowy z Hanną Krall, 110.

⁴⁸Agata Tuszyńska, “Żeby zapisywać. Spotkanie z Hanną Krall” [To write down. A conversation with Hanna Krall], *Więź* 3 (1988): 56.

⁴⁹Wiesław Kot, Hanna Krall (Poznań: Rebis, 2000), 102.

⁵⁰“Hanna Krall’s ‘documentary fairy tales,’ when examined closely, rarely end well. Though written in the gentle, almost enchanting language of fairy tales, they align more closely with the tragic structure of myth—which, as Bruno Bettelheim observed, differs from the fairy tale in that it always ends badly. But does not Krall’s choice of the fairy-tale convention risk softening the Holocaust to the point where the Holocaust itself becomes a ‘Hollycaust’?”. Michał Cichy, “Baśnie dokumentalne Hanny Krall” [Hanna Krall’s documentary fairy tales], *Gazeta Wyborcza* [The Electoral Gazette], 23 Jan. 1999, available online: <https://classic.wyborcza.pl/archiwumGW/646475/Basnie-dokumentalne-Hanny-Krall>.

⁵¹Rusek, 259.

“That’s not a cake!” cried Baba Yaga.

“If it isn’t a cake,” the Goat remarked, “if it is our lives, then surely the candles will be lit again when the fairy tale begins anew.”

“Oh no! If you blow out the candles yourselves, they will never be lit again. And then there will be no more fairy tales!”

They only laughed, amused by Baba Yaga-Death’s terror, and began to dance once more. Then they halted, drew in a deep breath...

“People!” Baba Yaga shouted with all her might. “What are you doing? There will never be fairy tales again!”

And so they stood, lungs filled, poised for the Great Blow, looking at the candles that still burned.⁵²

When asked if describing pedestrians was boring, Krall replied:

Perhaps it was once boring, but not anymore—because now I know how it ends. And knowing the ending changes everything. Each detail becomes an elegy for the vanished world. [...] Since I already know what came after, they will always exist. The wild woman will go on dancing on the carpet rack, the wine wholesaler’s wife will never gain weight, and the commune secretary will never cease to love her. These figures are frozen, fixed forever in that moment—at least in my books.⁵³

In *Co się stało z naszą bajką*, the characters freeze in the final scene; suspended between life and death, they mirror the figures Hanna Krall portrays in her reportages. The true drama lies not in the threat of death itself, but in the dancers’ reaction toward its inevitable approach. The final cry—“People! [...] What are you doing?”—is directed both at the fairy-tale characters and at readers, who expect reportage to be both a documentation of life and a narrative shaped with cinematic intensity.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁵²Krall, *Co się stało z naszą bajką*, 323.

⁵³Reporterka. *Rozmowy z Hanną Krall*, 76.

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KEYWORDS

fairy tale

Hanna Krall

ABSTRACT:

Co się stało z naszą bajką [What happened to our fairy tale] is Hanna Krall's only text intended for children and young adults. This article attempts to interpret it, paying particular attention to the changes in the subsequent editions and the impact these have on reception. To believe that every story can end happily is unthinkable in a world marked by the Holocaust. By adopting the fairy-tale form, Krall constructs a metatextual reflection directed at the readers of her reportages—readers who often overlook that *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem* [Shielding the flame] provides a profound educational lesson for schoolchildren and reminds us that childhood is not invariably a time of joy.

Holocaust

RECEPTION

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