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A Detailed New Biography Illuminates The Sad Life Of A Master Storyteller

By Marc Spiegler

For most adults, the name Hans Christian Andersen evokes a benign Dane, devoted to spinning cheery fairy tales for rapt children. That image is wrong on every count except his nationality, as England's Jackie Wullschlager reveals in her exhaustive new biography of Andersen. In fact, he was an obsessive social climber racked by everything from hypochondria to profound sexual frustration. His fairy tales are far from pleasant, especially when read within the context of his life. And during his life, Andersen was often equally esteemed for his novels and travelogues as for his fairy tales, which he started writing at 30.

Yet it was stories such as "The Ugly Duckling," "The Little Mermaid" and "The Emperor's New Clothes" that made him immortal, becoming freestanding idioms within Western culture. So, one might ask why should adults today care about Andersen? As a literary form, the fairy tale is often ghettoized within the children's section of book stores and libraries, far from the "real" writing. That is a travesty. Granted, the language of the fairy tale must stay within the confines of an intelligent child's vocabulary. Yet writers such as Albert Camus and Ernest Hemingway prove that simple verbiage does not preclude narrative depth. As for those readers put off by flying broomsticks, frog princes and so forth, are these any odder than the plot devices employed by Franz Kafka or Gabriel Garcia-Marquez? And while their basic plots are often simple, the greatest fairy tales are so multilayered that one can read (or reread) them in adulthood, discovering rich subtexts, social commentary, stylistic innovation and all the other attributes of "real" writing.

By no means did Andersen invent the fairy tale. The Grimm brothers of Germany preceded him, serving mainly as conduits, committing an oral tradition to paper. Andersen started similarly reworking tales heard during his childhood. Soon, however, he started inventing stories outright, launching a genre that would encompass everything from "The Chronicles of Narnia" by C.S. Lewis and Kenneth Grahame's "The Wind in the Willows" to the Dr. Seuss and Harry Potter series.

In developing this new form, Andersen drew relentlessly upon his own life. The ugly duckling's transformation from duck-pond pariah to sublime swan, for example, reflected a favorite take on his own life. Andersen's claim to fallen-aristocrat roots, which Wullschlager dismisses outright, served to rationalize his ascendance from poverty in backwater Odense to traversing social circles that included the nobility of Scandinavia, Prussia and England.

In truth, that rise had its origins not in blue-blood globules but in Andersen's freakish capacity to risk total humiliation while seeking social status. Often using the slightest social pretext, young Andersen would gain entry to the homes of members of the bourgeoisie and ambush them with surprise performances, which included improvised songs in his soprano voice and theater pieces in which he acted out all the characters. Though many

found his gawky tame and melodramatic acting laughable, others judged him an odd genius, granting him entree to Odense's higher social circles.

At 14, with a little money saved from such performances, he left for Denmark's capital, Copenhagen. His first time dim proved harsh. As Wullschlager recounts the period, Andersen "lived on the edge of want, he was often cold and hungry, his feet were soaking from the ice on his worn boots, he grew out of his clothes and he appeared absurd as he tried to pull down his sleeves and trousers to make them look as if they fitted or stuffed paper underneath the coats people gave him as cast-offs, refusing to unbutton them so they would not seem too big for his lean body" His greatest fear was having to return to Odense and start a trade apprenticeship. But Andersen managed to scrape by, then to live decently on donations and stipends from patrons, who made him a regular on their dinner-party circuit.

As Wullschlager makes clear, Andersen's social climbing came at great emotional cost. While Andersen luxuriated in a life centered on cultural outings, especially the theater, his diaries reveal that he always felt like an interloper among the elites. In one of the defining moments of Andersen's life, his old haute bourgeois friend Edvard Collin--with whom he had a long-running, unrequited infatuation--rejected his request that they address each other using the second-person informal *du* form. While this distinction does not exist in English, it remains a critical social mechanism throughout much of Europe. Only in his last years did Andersen find patrons to whom he felt equal: rich Danish Jews, themselves only half-assimilated into Copenhagen's upper crust.

In his frequently updated autobiographies, Andersen chronicled ever-more-fabulous meetings with ever-more-fabulous folk. His literary fame got him in the door, and his after-dinner dramatic readings of his fairy tales secured return engagements at the stately dinner tables. "As word spread of his success with one royal family, so another took him up," Wullschlager writes. "[H]is artistic persona, the child-like romantic genius who was tamely obsequious rather than threateningly radical, fulfilled, as (German poet Heinrich) Heine pointed out, 'exactly a prince's idea of a poet.'"

But if Andersen was well-received within the aristocracy's fatuous interactions, other writers tended to find his social style repulsive and a waste of talent. In a private letter, English writer Mary Russell Mitford called him "essentially a toad-eater, a hanger-on in great houses ... who uses fame merely as a key to open drawing-room doors, a ladder to climb to high places."

While his noble friends validated Andersen's self-image, they hardly made him happy. So rootless that he first bought furniture at age 61, the unattractive Andersen retained the romantic life of a dysfunctional teen, associating sexuality with social ruin. The closest he ever came to sex with a woman involved paying Parisian prostitutes to converse with him while their colleagues serviced his younger friends. Attempts at liaisons with men proved almost equally ill-fated; his few, younger lovers treated him as a brief waystation en route to marriage with social equals.

Not that Andersen would have made a good mate. He was stunningly self-centered, taking offense over the pettiest slights and turning his infatuations into public events by reading his impassioned love notes--and the generally far-less-impassioned replies--to his friends. But Andersen's romantic troubles were only part of a deeper disconnect between his fictionalized account of

his life and its painful reality. His stay with the family Of Charles Dickens, well detailed by Wullschlager, was an unmitigated disaster. The Dickens marriage was in full precollapse, and the accommodations fell well below Andersen's now-lofty standards: He was shocked when no one turned up to shave his face the first morning. Dickens' 5-yearold son constantly threatened to defenestrate Andersen, and a negative review left Andersen sobbing on Dickens' lawn. Yet Andersen dashed off letters to his friends that described a bucolic country stay with England's most glamorous writer.

But it would be a mistake to cast Andersen simply as a self-deceiving diva. At a time when few Scandinavians traveled widely, Andersen made it as far as Istanbul, Madrid and Sicily, often despite bad roads, bandits and oppressive heat. Compounding these real dangers with all sorts of imagined risks, he traveled quite badly. Terrified of being buried alive, he posted a sign beside his bed that read, "I only appear to be dead." In later years, he carried a rope ladder in his steamer trunk, to escape hotel fires.

Yet Andersen found inspiration in his travels and respite from depressive Denmark, where he felt underappreciated by his countrymen. Wherever he went in Europe, he sought signs of his own renown, even going into bookstores anonymously and starting conversations about himself. This constant need to shore up his ego sometimes backfired disastrously: When he visited Jakob Grimm in Berlin, he found his German colleague totally ignorant of his work. The Dane dashed away in shame.

"[B]eneath Andersen's insatiable need for fame was the hollowness of the man still seeking his sense of himself," Wullschlager explains, 'Andersen remained the [whining] child, searching across Europe for the sort of love and absolute approval that no one accords to adults, catching glimpses of it in an adulatory newspaper article here or a flattering party guest there, as he moved from one social triumph to another.'

This biography's depth of detail gives an added credibility to such assertions. Wullschlager's research seems extremely thorough, to the point that she compares the quality of Andersen's various translators with the original Danish and has read memoirs of peripheral characters to counterbalance his often-slanted recounting of events.

At times, the great mountain of facts she has amassed obscures her central themes, freighting her writing style with too much weaving-in of tangents and scene-setting. But such passages do give the reader context to understand Andersen's emotional torture. What made Andersen particularly unhappy was his historical context. Born earlier, he simply could not have ascended to such high-flung circles. Born later, he might not have felt so insecure within them. As it was, he teetered along the cusp of social revolution. Through his work, Andersen transcended social class. Yet he never shook his boyhood role as the histrionic entertainer of his social betters, and he remained dependent upon their approval to fulfill the fairy tale woven in his mind.

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