



MONTCLAIR STATE
UNIVERSITY

Montclair State University
**Montclair State University Digital
Commons**

Department of English Faculty Scholarship and
Creative Works

Department of English

Spring 2012

Fairy Tales Redux: Jon Scieszka's Revitalization of a Genre for the 21st Century Kid."

Laura Nicosia

Montclair State University, nicosiala@mail.montclair.edu

James Nicosia

Montclair State University, nicosiaj@montclair.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/english-facpubs>



Part of the [Elementary Education Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

MSU Digital Commons Citation

Nicosia, Laura and Nicosia, James, "Fairy Tales Redux: Jon Scieszka's Revitalization of a Genre for the 21st Century Kid." (2012). *Department of English Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works*. 5.
<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/english-facpubs/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of English Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.



Illustration by Jake D. Nicosia

Fairy Tales Redux: Jon Scieszka's Revitalization of a Genre for the 21st Century Kid

By James F. Nicosia and Laura M. Nicosia

By the time the average reader reaches second grade, he or she has been exposed to such an abundance of canonical fairy tales that the traditional version of the genre no longer holds sway. Television offers its viewers updated versions of Grimm, Mother Goose, et al, with modern translations by such new master storytellers as Elmo; Arthur the Aardvark; and the queen of all narrators, Dora the Explorer.

Computer and video systems such as the Wii now have games like *Story Hour* which offer interactive fairy tales within which players move and become immersed. Our aim is not to assert so much that the genre is hackneyed, but rather

that the information age has rendered the classic fairy tale—bland. Rather than being stories that reach eager young ears, fairy tales as we know them are more likely to be received by a “ho-hum, yes, I’ve heard that story already. Tell me something new.”

The voracious young reader of the 21st century has a breadth and variety of reading materials that no generation previous has enjoyed. A single reader may consume 100 books to exhaust a handful of favorite series, for example. *The Magic Tree House*, *A to Z Mysteries*, and *My Weird School* series alone account for upwards of 150 volumes, and counting. Ancient fairy tales, while initially as engaging as any other

first-heard story, do not dominate the literary landscape the way they did in previous generations. If only for the fact that they possess in number an increasingly shrinking percentage of the available texts, the fairy tale needs to evolve in order to maintain its place in the hearts and minds of contemporary children.

To keep fairy tales fresh, former National Ambassador for Young People's Literature Jon Scieszka revitalizes the genre by sequelling, deconstructing, perspectivizing, intertextualizing and downright parodying the traditional tales. As a result, he resurrects the genre in ways that makes old stories new for today's audience.

Works like *The Frog Prince, Continued* take an existing text and address those critical thinkers who may question, "What does happily ever after really mean?" Scieszka answers that question with wit, humor, a dose of cynicism, but ultimately with a celebration of texts. Happily ever after can mean many things; what it does not mean is, "life stops because two people live in eternal bliss." Instead of the end of all problems as we know them, the modern world, as American children learn earlier now than in any time previous, shows life goes on pretty much as it did before, punctuated by periods of happiness.

Jack Zipes says, "We do not know happiness, but we instinctually know and feel that it can be created and perhaps even defined. Fairy tales map out possible ways to attain happiness, to expose and resolve moral conflicts that have deep roots in our species" ("Are Fairy Tales" 2). Scieszka includes in his revisitings of fairy tales a healthy dose of happiness, tempered by Zipes' exposure of moral conflicts, but with very little lasting resolution. He asserts that we need less tidy fairy tales. His practice, in fact, seems to be in direct contrast with J. R. R. Tolkien's assertion that, "Far more important [than the satisfaction of ancient desires] is the Consolation of the Happy Ending. . . all complete fairy-stories must have it" (68).

In fact, the very first convention Scieszka seems to obliterate is the happy ending. Scieszka would concur with Zipes's assertion: "As our environment changes and evolves, so we change the media or modes of the tales to enable us to

adapt to new conditions and shape instincts that were not necessarily generated for the world that we have created out of nature" (2).

When Scieszka deconstructs such fairy tales as "The Princess and the Pea" in his *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, he updates them with a unique, and perhaps a more worldly, perspective that the contemporary child shares. He asserts that the happily ever after ending is porous and elastic enough to be not-so-eternally-after and that today's readers are comfortable with such a spin on the original. Furthermore, he recognizes that, for today's children, absurd endings are just as plausible as the equally bizarre and static "ever after." And quite frankly, they are more thoughtful and funny. As such, Scieszka respects and honors his audience's developing intellect.

Addressing perhaps the most retold fairy tale of the past hundred years, Scieszka turns "The Three Little Pigs" on its ear by presenting the tale from the wolf's point of view. As such, the genre is reinvigorated by the postmodern anti-Hero perspective rather than by the actions of an archetypal hero à la Aristotle, Joseph Campbell or Tolkien. This act of what we call perspectivization requires the reader to reconsider the fairy tale where previously it would go unobserved. In this case, that is to say, if familiarity breeds contempt, peculiarity breeds attentiveness.

Scieszka's fourth method is found in works such as his *Summer Reading Is Killing Me* installment of the *Time Warp Trio* series. Here, he critiques and pays homage to many of the major texts of the past 200 years. He alternately satirizes and samples, exhibiting that even an ultra-hip set of characters such as his can do well to be informed by the classics. In fact, it is upon the thorough understanding of the classics that the New World of his modern fairy tale is built. Of course, once such an understanding is achieved, Scieszka asserts, all bets are off, and no text is treated with kid gloves. This is where the interchangeable complexity and fun can be found.

Finally, Scieszka serves up a parodic series of thoroughly revised and thoroughly original fairy

tales built on postmodern detachment, deconstruction, and competing interrelated (meta-)narratives. Nikolajeva explains that today's young adult and children's literature "transgress[es] its own boundaries, coming closer to mainstream literature, and exhibiting the most prominent features of postmodernism, such as genre eclecticism, disintegration of traditional narrative structures, polyphony, intersubjectivity, and metafiction" (221). As we shall see, Scieszka's fairy tales blur the genre boundary lines and redefine the form.

Renewal by Sequelling

Scieszka's *The Frog Prince, Continued*, is his most notable attempt at sequelling, and, perhaps, the work most faithful to the original fairy tale's storyline. Here, Scieszka picks up where the original fairy tale left off... and they lived happily ever after... and modernizes while simultaneously deconstructs the myth of "happily ever after." Less fun than his more famous *True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*, Scieszka may in fact hit a little too close to home for some readers when he reveals the Prince and Princess in a constant state of argument. Perhaps because it proceeds from an inherently dark premise does it receive as much critical attention as it does.

In it, the Prince and Princess endure such postnuptial blues as the frog's croaking snores, his hopping around on the furniture and "sticking your tongue out like that." Not to mention the Princess' nagging about the Prince's aforementioned flaws. When the Princess suggests, "Sometimes I think we would both be better off if you were still a frog," the Prince is struck by a brainstorm. He returns to the forest in search of a witch to reverse his spell.

This sequel is a successful inversion of the classical quest motif. What follows is the heart of this fairy tale's success; that is, Scieszka exhibits his fluency in fairy tale sorcery as the Prince confronts three witches looking for help. The first proves to be the witch of Sleeping Beauty fame, the second Snow White's witch, the third, the witch of Hansel and Gretel stories. But

Scieszka repeats each time a form of his metatextual refrain, "The Prince, who . . . knew his fairy tales, ran as fast as he could deeper into the forest." This addition by Scieszka is, in fact, a fairy/folk tale element identified by Vladimir Propp, proving that Scieszka has mastered the form before manipulating it. Like the Prince, Scieszka knows his witches, and revels in exposing them.

As for the Prince, he ends up consulting Cinderella's Fairy Godmother for help. As a fairly inept witch, she is the comic highlight of the story. "I suppose I could give it a try," she says. "I've never done frogs before, you know." She proceeds to turn the Frog Prince into a carriage. As the hours pass and the Prince grows increasingly frightened, the story unwinds into a series of fearful Princely worries that ultimately get him to realize how life wasn't so bad at home. When the clock strikes 12, he returns to his human self and to his home where he is immediately berated: "Where have you been? I've been worried sick. You're seven hours late. Your dinner is cold. Your clothes are a mess."

Though the story ends with Prince and Princess reunited with a loving kiss that turns them both into frogs, the story's success lies in its reintroduction of four classic witches from fairy tale fame. It also, in fact, parodies them by showing them to be no more than ever-so-slight variations of a simple theme. These characters may be flawed. However, despite—and perhaps because of—their obvious shortcomings, readers relate to and enjoy them. Zipes has said, "this is perhaps one of the lessons that the best of fairy tales and teach us: we are all misfit for the world" ("Are Fairy Tales" 2). Scieszka, as student of the genre, deploys these weaknesses with skill and aplomb to great effect. The fairy tale witch, in this case, does not escape Scieszka's critical-comic brushstrokes.

Renewal by Deconstruction

While he lovingly honors some classic stories, Scieszka seems to have little patience for certain fairy tales, and does little to hide his dismissal of the very foundation of some myths. Case in point is "The Princess and the Bowling Ball."

To be sure, Scieszka is a writer, primarily, of what is increasingly termed “boy books.” As politically incorrect as this may sound, the truth of postmodern publishing will bear out the great majority of newly published works being easily classified as marketed to one or the other gender. Those books that cross boundaries are not, in fact, rare. Frequently they espouse traditionally male themes and characterization and just so happen to feature female protagonists. Jim Benton’s delightful *Franny K. Stein* series is one such example, Lauren Child’s cheeky *Clarice Bean* another, and Megan McDonald’s multi-faceted *Judy Moody* (the books, not the movie) perhaps the best example of a crossover success.

As Zipes discusses in *Fairy Tale Culture*, “There’s no reason why a good writer of fantasy shouldn’t introduce a much more sophisticated sense of what it is to be a young woman or a young boy today” (1). As for Scieszka, he fashions just such contemporary female protagonists and exhibits a mindful disregard for the traditional gender roles, utilizing them solely to expose their soft underbelly. Furthermore, he seems to privilege the new generation’s ability to reject the outdated motifs of previous generations. Evidence the almost palpable sarcasm with which he begins the tale:

Once upon a time there was a Prince. And this Prince’s dad and mom (the King and Queen) somehow got it into their royal heads that no Princess would be good enough for their boy unless she could feel a pea through one hundred mattresses.

So it should come as no surprise that the Prince had a very hard time finding a Princess.

What to do with such a ridiculous plot set in a culturally defunct, undemocratic and sexist caste system that perpetuates a flagrantly elitist belief that some young women are inherently superior to others because they cannot adapt to anything out of the ordinary? Scieszka exposes it by deconstructing it from its core. On the one hand, Scieszka’s narrator endears himself to the

young reader, recognizing what many past readers must have already felt about the story. That is to say, he throws the readerly “willing suspension of disbelief” out the window, challenges Tolkein’s seminal definition of the genre, wherein within the fairy tale world, the reader assumes that the author “relates [what] is ‘true: it accords with the laws of that world” (37). Frankly, today’s reader recognizes that [As in the original fairy tale,] no Princess could feel a pea under 100 mattresses. And each time, “the King would show her the door.” Jann Einfeld says “the traditional triumphant ending of the tale is bypassed, leaving the reader anxious . . . jolt[ing] the reader into new awareness, to question old assumptions with an alert and critical eye” (30-31). Scieszka aligns himself with the reader with a nod in respecting—not the original fairy tale—but the modern reader’s disbelief of such a preposterous proposition in the first place.

He further curries favor with the reader by providing a decidedly less-than-fairy explanation for the denouement. His “out,” in fact, is empirical science, which (in an anti-Tolkein stance) replaces the magic of fairy tales. In this case, the Prince becomes the hero by recognizing the absurdity of his parents’ royal requirements. When he meets “the girl of his dreams. . . . He decided he better do something about it. That night, before the Princess went to bed, the Prince slipped his bowling ball under the one hundred mattresses.” Of course, the Princess sleeps horribly, which pleases the King and Queen to no end. It certainly pleases the Prince and his soon-to-be-new bride.

While these characters may get their way, they bend the rules in order to do so. We may never find out if Scieszka’s Princess-to-be would feel the pea, though there is every reason to believe nobody would. But, as Einfeld states, “classic fairy tales do not deny the existence of heartache and sorrow, but they do deny universal defeat.” Scieszka avoids defeat and provides one last wink to his audience by acknowledging, “And everyone lived happily, though maybe not completely honestly, ever after.”

Renewal by Altering Perspectives

Scieszka's attitude toward fairy tales is no more clearly expressed than in the opening words to his seminal *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*: "Everybody knows the story of the Three Little Pigs. Or at least they think they do." But when the narrator turns out to be none other than A. Wolf, and reveals, "Nobody knows the real story, because nobody has ever heard my side of the story," Scieszka prepares to invert this tale through the alteration of narrative perspective. Indeed, while many variations of the original exist, narrative unreliability is never actually considered in former incarnations.

Successfully relocating the focus of the narrative results from the predisposition of the readers' suspension of disbelief. Once children (or adults) begin reading a fairy tale, "the process of reading involves dislocating the reader from his/her familiar setting and then identifying with the [already] dislocated protagonist" (Zipes "Are Fairy Tales" 2). For that matter, narrative reliability is almost never a concern in fairy tales. Scieszka changes the preconceptions that the events of fairy tales must be accepted at face value, and probably at no time previous would an intended readership readily question events as it is in the 21st century.

Alexander T. Wolf is a likeable enough character from the outset, as he adjusts his John Lennon spectacles in Lane Smith's delightful chiaroscuro illustration. "I don't know how this whole Big Bad Wolf thing got started," he explains from his jail cell, "but it's all wrong."

Wolf's first approach to reaching his audience is to play on what the latest generation has learned that previous generations did not. Ubiquitous and erstwhile wildlife educators like Jeff Corwin, Nigel Marvin and Steve Irwin have made it clear to even preschoolers that "predator" no longer equals "bad guy," and Wolf knows it, as well. "Maybe it's because of our diet," he proffers. "Hey, it's not my fault wolves eat cute little animals like bunnies and sheep and pigs. That's just the way we are. If cheeseburgers were cute, folks would probably think you were

Big and Bad, too." It is, for a talking wolf, a salient point.

As for the real reason for the demolition of the two pigs' houses, Scieszka invokes the most popular classic *deus ex machina* of all time, the sneezing fit. Do kids believe Alexander when he tells them it all started because he had "a sneezing cold?" Probably, but they certainly do so with a degree of skepticism. To make a birthday cake for his grandma (the one with big eyes and big teeth), "I walked down the street to ask my neighbor for a cup of sugar. Now this neighbor . . . wasn't too bright. . . . He build his house out of straw. Can you believe it? I mean, who in his right mind would build a house of straw?" In talking so familiarly, the wolf is thus further endeared to the reader. One of the first twists Al presents from his perspective then follows, and it is a dubious contention. That is, "the minute I knocked on the door, it fell right in." But the wolf continues politely: "I didn't want to just walk into someone's house, so I called, 'Little pig, little pig, are you in?' No answer." Now here we notice the subtle but significant alteration in this incantation from the traditional, "Little pig, little pig, LET me in."

This wolf says and does all the right things. Since there is no response from the straw house pig, he plans to leave, but of course, this is when his cold kicks in. He huffs, he snuffs and he "sneezed a great sneeze." Al is the only one surprised that "that whole darn straw house fell down. And right in the middle of the pile of straw was the First Little Pig—dead as a doornail." He even seems genuinely insulted that the pig "had been home the whole time" but hadn't answered. Getting over his disappointment, Al returns to rationalization mode: "It seemed like a shame to leave a perfectly good ham dinner lying there in the straw. So I ate it up. Think of it as a big cheeseburger just lying there."

It is no surprise to the reader that the pattern repeats itself with the second pig, and when Al arrives at the third pig's house still in search of that elusive cup of sugar, he discovers the smartest, and most discourteous, of the three brothers: "Do you know what that rude little

porker answered? ‘Get out of here wolf. Don’t bother me again.’ Talk about impolite. He probably had a whole sackful of sugar. And he wouldn’t give me even one little cup. . . . What a pig.” After enduring a few more insults, the wolf loses his temper, the police arrive, and the legend is born.

Ultimately, how does the story get so distorted? In a twist of intertextuality, the wolf introduces media irresponsibility—and, thus, narrative unreliability—into the mix: “The news reporters . . . figured a sick guy going to borrow a cup of sugar didn’t sound very exciting. So they jazzed up the story with all of that ‘Huff and puff and blow your house down,’ and they made me the Big Bad Wolf.” In this case, A. Wolf draws the reader’s attention to the story’s status as a metafictional cultural artifact, stimulating humor at the absurdity of such a situation and hopefully provoking critical thinking about the difference between truths and lies.

Although telling this fairy tale from a different perspective ostensibly claims to exhibit what happens when textual elements are observed from a different angle, *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* ends up instructing that preconceptions will always do you in, but more importantly it is a mini treatise on how to lie, a didacticism very much opposed to the typically moralistic fairy tale endings that have enchanted previous generations.

Renewal by Intertextuality / Metafiction

Though certainly not his most talked about work, Scieszka’s magnum opus is the seventh installment of his *The Time Warp Trio* series, *Summer Reading Is Killing Me*. Indeed, like his metafictional fairy tale/fable assaults, *Squids Will Be Squids* and *The Stinky Cheese Man*, *Summer Reading* may be too clever for its own good. In fact, it depends upon a working knowledge of no less than two dozen different classic pieces of children’s literature for its allusions to perform their functions. Scieszka’s implied audience is, in this case, certainly not children. In fact, the audience itself is a fiction, because it is unreasonable to expect that any one child would be intimately familiar with such disparate works

and writers as Aesop, The American Girls Series; M. Daniel Pinkwater, E.B. White, Lloyd Alexander, Lewis Carroll, Washington Irving, Marjorie Sharmot, William Steig and Laura Ingalls Wilder. Embedding narratives within other tales, whether explicitly or implicitly, requires deft readerly manipulations of plots and stories. In Scieszka’s texts, the narrative textures of these allusive literary metafictional texts produce a fascinating yet problematic construct—the necessary assumption of an implied, experienced reader with copious classical children’s cultural and literary capital.

When *Summer Reading* opens with the trio of protagonists, Joe, Sam and Fred staring up a 250-pound chicken, it presents an only slightly exaggerated form of Time Warp Trio absurdity, but gradually the boys begin to recognize themselves in the fictive realm. “Excuse me guys,” says Sam, the brains of the group, “Did you ever get the feeling that all of this has happened before, exactly like this?”

Those familiar with Pinkwater’s 1977 *Hoboken Chicken Emergency* might immediately pick up on the paeon, but it takes the boys—and the average reader—quite a bit longer. Instead of merely playing along with the scenario, however, the boys also take the opportunity to make critical statements on Pinkwater’s text, with Sam continuing to recognize literary motifs shared within his own, (i.e. Scieszka’s) text: “Well, except with maybe a black knight instead of a giant chicken, of course.” Indeed, in the first installment of the Time Warp Trio series, they found themselves confronted in the exact same manner by a towering black knight. Furthermore, Sam parodies his own fictional realm by saying, “Joe, isn’t this right about when you should do some magic trick and get us out of here?” The irony contained in this statement is that, in previous Trio adventures, Joe would have attempted a magic trick, but unlike the magic of fairy tales, Joe’s magic usually fails to extricate them from their situation.

Scieszka begins *Summer Reading* as he does each of the *Time Warp Trio* episodes, with the

boys already having been transported via their enigmatic glyph-filled blue-and-silver book to another time and place. This installment, however, is the only that finds them lifted to a fictive realm, and when the second chapter begins, necessarily in a flashback from where this latest adventure commenced, it reveals the boys sitting in Joe's room discussing what to do on their first day of summer vacation. Like so many fairy tales, the boys hold the key to the magic spells that can transport them in time. Unlike so many fairy tales, however, it has yet to be revealed to them, or to the reader, precisely what that key is. Through some combination of dialogue and accessing the book, they create the world that they found themselves implanted in during the opening chapters of each installment.

In *Summer Reading*, Sam is the only one who wants to "get an early start on this [reading] list." He then begins to read from it: "The list has Hatchet, The Phantom Tollbooth, The Hoboken Chicken Emergency. . ." As Fred skates around Joe's room, this foreshadows the accident that the reader knows will somehow dislodge The Book, activating the green time-travel mist that precipitates their adventure. Sam and Fred counterpoint each other, the former reading from the list while Fred answers with skating moves:

"Matilda, Flat Stanley."
 "gumby, stale Japan..."
 "or here's Tuck Everlasting,"
 "rocket 360"
 "Bunnacula,"
 "fishbrain"

When Fred co-opts Sam's list and "stuck it in a book from my shelf, shoved the book back on the shelf, and jumped back on the bed," the reader recognizes what book it is that Fred has chosen. As Fred and Sam's war of words continues, Joe recognizes the leaking green mist from his bookshelf is about to decide for them what they will be doing on their summer vacation. And since their incantations prior to opening the Book determine where they will travel, each of Sam's references becomes the setting for the *tour de force* that follows. *Summer Reading*, literally, may

end up killing them.

Before the trio—or reader—can truly get their bearings, the cast of characters expands, and a flood of classic and contemporary fairy tale, fable and other children's book characters enters the scene. Each intertextual intrusion further draws this fairy tale's slide into the realm of the absurd. In the pages that follow, the boys side with or hide from Peter Rabbit, the Red Queen from *Chronicles of Narnia*, Lloyd Alexander's Horned King, an evil Teddy Bear, "a curious-looking monkey, and a boy pushing a wheelbarrow filled with one very large orange carrot."

The boys piece together their combined knowledge of fairy tales, classic and contemporary children's literature to make sense of what's happening to them. Along the way, they are privy to Charlotte's web messages instructing them to seek out the Hoboken library. When they arrive there, they discover the challenge that awaits them: every "bad guy" from every book on the entire school's summer reading list is imprisoning every protagonist, with no regard to textual integrity: "I saw Homer Price being carried by the Headless Horseman. Dracula was dragging Winnie-the-Pooh in a headlock. Mr. Twit was breaking Harold's purple crayon. I saw 20 different bad guys from 20 different books chasing, hauling, and pushing all kinds of characters up the steps of the big old brick building." Because that library also houses their magic Book that can bring them home, the boys realize it is their turn to become characters in children's books. This is where the fun really begins, for, of course, they do not realize they already are literary characters, even when the reader does. When Joe has to recreate himself as narrative leader of the group, which he *de facto* already is, his moniker for the group becomes: "we're the Time Warp Trio."

Ultimately, the bad guys' plan is unveiled. They intend to crush all the protagonists of the elementary school reading lists and take over. Their final transformations of literature would result in titles like "Frankenstein in Wonderland, *The Devil in the Willows*, *Green Eggs and Dracula*,

and *Headless Horseman the Pooh*.”

All comes to a head in the masterpiece that is the ninth chapter, when a composite girl from *Anne of Green Gables*, the *Little House*, *Little Women*, *Nancy Drew*, *Babysitters Club*, *Sweet Valley High* and *American Girls* series begins her verbose litany of memories from numerous nondescript stories. Scieszka is unrelenting in his criticism here, for one by one all the bad guys begin nodding off. Were it not for Long John Silver’s parrot, the boredom induced by the Girl would have worked its charm to perfection.

Alas, adventure would win the day, but before alienating his entire female audience, Scieszka is quick to include the Girl in the penultimate chapter’s excitement. As if to suggest that “girl series” are not even valuable for girls, he quickly asserts the Girl as Fred’s equal when it comes to fighting her way out of danger. Scieszka pairs the two as primary shooters of the most dangerous and ostensibly most useless books they can find against the bad guys. Through the pair’s subsequent actions, Scieszka exhibits that he is not attacking girls in any way, but those texts that assert girls as little more than long-winded narrators who spend more time discussing things that have happened rather than engaging in the events of their own fictions. By turning narratives on their heads and making impromptu commentaries on his and other fictions, Scieszka’s *Summer Reading Is Killing Me* finds yet another way to reorder the reader’s experiences of traditional children’s literature. And despite the inversions he utilizes, Scieszka’s book embraces several of the central themes which “crop up time and again in the fairy tale” (Lüthi “Central Themes” 48). These include: the human world is not in order; no problem is hopeless; help may come from supernatural (or mystical) powers; and the disempowered may conquer the hegemony (48). Scieszka again illustrates the ability to subvert the traditional through an intimate knowledge of it.

Renewal by Parody

The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales is, visually, verbally and conceptually, the most inventive construction from the

Scieszka/Smith tandem, playing on every element of book creation, from the dust jacket to the title page, to the Introduction to the ISBN number.

Metanarratively, the book is every bit the rollicking funhouse that *Summer Reading* is, but its parodic play stands out even more perceptibly than perhaps any other element. Most of the tales are fun, as when Chicken Licken’s claims of the sky falling prove unfounded. Instead, it is the Table of Contents that falls on the characters from this first story and crushes them to oblivion. The shock value and humor are palpable—and the audience laughs not with dismissal, but from the sheer joy of the absurd. Clearly, Scieszka’s use of pratfalls and slapstick are a melding of his form and its function.

Scieszka’s parody often takes the form of abruptly clipped endings. When the eponymous character in “The Really Ugly Duckling” believes that one day he will grow up to be a beautiful swan—apparently having read his own press—or that of some distant relative, he grows up surprised to be “just a really ugly duck. The end.”

Metaphysics can play no stronger role in the postmodern fairy tale than can the aristocratic ideas of the Princess and the Pea. Likewise, Scieszka satisfies the critical mind in “The Other Frog Prince.” Here, the Princess lifts her frog out of the pond to kiss him and is greeted by his curt response: “‘I was just kidding,’ said the frog. He jumped back into the pond and the Princess wiped the frog slime off her lips. The End.” Scieszka treats his audience with the sincere respect accorded the intelligent. They know frogs don’t turn into princes. Furthermore, the fairy tale—or as he revises it, fairly stupid tale—is funnier having the Princess wiping frog slime from her lips.

The reverse strategy to the clipped ending is when Scieszka employs the 1001 Arabian Knights trick. In one tale, Jack is caught by the Giant in a parody of *Jack and the Beanstalk*. The Giant squeezes Jack and says:

“Tell me a better story or I will grind your bones to make my bread. And when your story is finished, I will grind your bones to

make my bread anyway!"

"Ho ho ho," Jack thought, "There's only one way to get out of this." Jack cleared his throat and then began his story. "Once upon a time there was a Giant.

The Giant squeezed Jack and said, "Tell me a better story or I will grind your bones to make my bread."

The story repeats itself as typographically, the text continually shrinks until it is practically unreadable; its last lines are even cut off by the bottom of the book's page.

Final Thoughts

Given the ubiquitous nature of video and computer games, cable television and portable entertainment, today's children have a hunger for new and ever-changing forms of entertainment. Fairy tales have been repeatedly heaped upon them without much attention. Jon Scieszka has mastered the fairy tale's reinvention, freshening it for the savvy young reader, and often, the savvy young reluctant reader.

Whether by sequelling, deconstructing, changing perspectives, creating metafiction or parodying, the modern fairy tale as revisited by Scieszka exhibits an unwillingness to treat the fairy tale with the kind of reverence that has typically been afforded the genre. Instead, with a blend of homage and impatience,

Scieszka takes liberties with the fairy tale.

What happens after happily ever after is one of the new questions that must be posed to the typical fairy tale, no longer able to exist for itself. A second question, the deconstructionist "Does this make sense in today's world" further interrogates the genre. Yet another approach is to challenge ancient political incorrectness and reconsider such concepts as predator and princess. Finally, by reconsidering the genre, and then poking fun at its traits, writers like Scieszka can revivify it. That is to say, after taking the genre apart piece by piece, from the characters to the stories to the perspectives to the conventions of the genre itself, he can put it back together in a skewed postmodern pastiche that is recognizable as what it was, but clearly a new construction. Only when the genre has been thoroughly dismantled can it indeed be put together in meaningful 21st century ways.

Works Cited

- Einfeld, Jann, Editor. *Fairy Tales*. San Diego: Greenhaven P, 2001.
- Lüthi, Max. in Einfeld. "Central Themes of Classical Fairy Tales."
- . *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales*. Trans. Lee Chadeayne and Paul Gottwald. New York: Ungar, 1970.
- Scieszka, Jon. *The Frog Prince, Continued*. New York: Viking, 1991.
- . *Squids Will Be Squids*. New

York: Viking, 2003.

- . *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*. New York: Viking, 1989.
- . *The Stinky Cheese Man, and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*. New York: Viking, 1992.
- . *Summer Reading Is Killing Me*. New York: Viking, 1998.
- Tolkein, J. R. R. *Tree and Leaf*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.
- Zipes, Jack. "Are Fairy Tales Still Useful To Children?" *The Art of Storytelling Show*. June 2008. January 6, 2009: www.storytellingwithchildren.com/2008/06/29/jack-zipes-fairy-tales/
- . "Interview with Jack Zipes." *Fairy Tale Culture*. November 2001. January 6, 2009: www.locusmag.com/2001/Issue11/Zipes.html.

James Nicosia, PhD, is a teacher, scholar, children's book writer and children's literacy advocate. He teaches literature and observes teacher education candidates in the field for Montclair State University. He is Treasurer of the NJCTE.

Laura Nicosia, PhD, is an Associate Professor of English, and the Director of English Education at Montclair State University. She specializes in American literature, YA literature, science fiction & fantasy, and explores uses of technology to improve teaching and learning. She serves as State Representative for the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents and is President of the New Jersey Council of Teachers of English.