

Article

We All Live in Fabletown: Bill Willingham's Fables—A Fairy-Tale Epic for the 21st Century

Jason Marc Harris

Department of English, Texas A&M University, MS 4227 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843, USA; jharris@tamu.edu; Tel.: +1-979-845-8358

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Abstract: Bill Willingham's *Fables* comic book series and its spin-offs have spanned fourteen years and reinforce that fairy-tale characters are culturally meaningful, adaptable, subversive, and pervasive. Willingham uses fairy-tale pastiche and syncretism based on the ethos of comic book crossovers in his redeployment of previous approaches to fairy-tale characters. *Fables* characters are richer for every perspective that Willingham deploys, from the Brothers Grimm to Disneyesque aesthetics and more erotic, violent, and horrific incarnations. Willingham's approach to these fairy-tale narratives is synthetic, idiosyncratic, and libertarian. This tension between Willingham's subordination of fairy-tale characters to his overarching libertarian ideological narrative and the traditional folkloric identities drives the storytelling momentum of the *Fables* universe. Willingham's portrayal of Bigby (the Big Bad Wolf turned private eye), Snow White ("Fairest of Them All", Director of Operations of Fabletown, and avenger against pedophilic dwarves), Rose Red (Snow's divergent, wild, and jealous sister), and Jack (narcissistic trickster) challenges contemporary assumptions about gender, heroism, narrative genres, and the very conception of a fairy tale. Emerging from negotiations with tradition and innovation are fairy-tale characters who defy constraints of folk and storybook narrative, mythology, and metafiction.

Keywords: folklore; fables; *Fables*; Bill Willingham; *Jack of Fables*; comic books; graphic novel; fairy tale; Grimm

1. Introduction

Bill Willingham's contributions to fairy-tales in popular culture have spanned fourteen years: from twenty-two collected volumes of his completed *Fables* (2002–2015) comic book series and multiple spin-offs such as *Jack of Fables* (2006–2011) and *Fairest* (2012–2015), as well as the five episodes of the *Fables* video game *The Wolf Among Us* (2013), and the novel *Peter and Max* (2009).¹ *Fables* exemplifies how fairy-tale characters continue to be meaningful in contemporary media. As Adam Zolcover identifies in "Corporalizing Fairy Tales", Willingham's work stands out from previous comic books that have engaged folklore: "[Neil] Gaiman [in *Sandman*] and [Alan] Moore [in *Promethea*] seem interested in using folklore to explore issues of imagination spirituality, and [...] [Walter] Simonson is interested in using myth to enrich a preexisting fictional landscape [*Thor*], Willingham's *Fables* works in the opposite direction, using the comic book medium [...] to comment on the fairy tales themselves" ([2], p. 40). What distinguishes *Fables* is not only the subtle and vivid framing with

¹ Fans of *Fables* also credit *Once Upon a Time* with being deeply influenced by Willingham's fairy-tale universe, although Willingham himself dismisses the idea. He offered a "call to disarm" to his fans and reminded readers and viewers that folklore is characterized by continuous development and adaptation to match contemporary tastes: "The Brothers Grimm didn't collect one version of every folktale; they discovered dozens of versions of each one, because it's the nature of folklore to be altered to suit every different folk who wants to make use of it. Why should today be any different?" [1].

beautiful, intense, and varied illustrations, such as those by lead-artist Mark Buckingham, but the ways that Willingham deepens fairy-tale characters through innovative narrative techniques. *Fables* both respects and subverts tradition, revisiting and defying old tales by exploring new possibilities of fairy-tale characters' personal autonomy. *Fables* integrates comic book aesthetics, metafiction, folklore, satire, and synthesis with Willingham's libertarian ideology.

2. Innovative Imitations: The Use of Fairy-Tale Pastiche in *Fables*

The last couple decades have revealed alignments among narrative features of comic books, folklore, and post-modern literary techniques. As Gail de Voss explains, there is much in the reading experience of a comic book that relates to the audience participation with oral performance of folklore: "In the comic book format, the reader must speculate on what happens in the gutters (the space between the panels) as well as read the visual cues to interpret the story and, as in the oral tale, the experience and background of the reader not only enrich the story read but also individualize it" ([3], p. 152). Beyond de Voss's recognition of this folkloric dynamic of reading comic books, the comic book medium often veers towards a self-conscious mixture of narrative elements where a degree of imitation is inevitable—and especially fundamental in the case of fairy-tale comic books, which by story and design involve a vivid commentary on the preceding tradition. This use of pastiche is common with post-modern literary fiction, and it is no surprise that Willingham utilizes pastiche in his redeployment of previous approaches to the fairy-tale characters of *Fables*, but the use of this technique is far from the "dead language" of Fredric Jameson's conception of degraded literary parody.² Following Linda Hutchinson's emphasis that "postmodern parody does not disregard the context of the past" and her citation of Angela Carter as one of the examples of "novelty and individuality" in the use of pastiche, I would argue that Willingham, like Carter, is successful in his parodic challenges of past fairy-tale narratives ([5], p. 90). Furthermore, Willingham's use of fairy-tale pastiche recalls much earlier authorial innovators with the fairy-tale tradition who had also underscored the adult themes of fairy-tales. Fairy-tale parodies in eighteenth-century France, for example, as Jack Zipes explains in *Why Fairy Tales Stick* "bordered on the burlesque and even on the macabre and grotesque. [...] Sentimental love was parodied. Numerous tales abandoned morality for pornography and eroticism" ([6], p. 76). Zolkoover defines Willingham's "fairy-tale pastiche" as "a postmodernist blending of elements from a variety of loci within fairy-tale discourse that serves at once as commentary, play, and a fairy tale in its own right" ([2], p. 41). *Fables* is also a broad cultural text that engages aspects of contemporary America, with regard to media, sexuality, and politics. The *Fables* fairy-tale characters are richer for every perspective that Willingham explores, from classic literary renderings of famous collections to Disneyesque aesthetics and more violent, ribald, and horrific treatments.

Willingham's approach to fairy-tale narrative is syncretic but also idiosyncratic. Referring to his titular protagonist of *Jack of Fables* Willingham explains, "Jack can be Jack Horner, Jack of the Beanstalk, Jack in the Green, and Jack the Giant Killer, but absolutely not Jack Spratt. I needed Spratt to be his own fellow and so he was, by absolute writer's fiat" [7]. It is this very tension between Willingham's subordination of fairy-tale characters to his overarching narrative and the traditional folkloric identities that drives the storytelling momentum of the *Fables* universe. We see this narrative engine, building friction between invention and tradition, following comic book crossover precedents, folktales and booktales, national mythology and personal imagination—especially with such characters and stories as the Big Bad Wolf's redemption and romance with Snow White, the elaborate rivalry between Snow White and Rose Red, the bitterness of Pinocchio, the solipsistic deification of Jack, and the moral complexity of Frau TotenKinder, the fabled witch and cannibal of the Brothers Grimm' "Hansel and

² "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter ([4], p. 17).

Gretel". Willingham's *Fables* reconfigures fairy tale characters as comic book demigods whose power depends upon both popular and traditional culture but whose choices can transcend the cultural constraints of previous narratives. The *Fables* universe values tradition but celebrates innovation.

3. Fabletown: Neverland in the Big Apple—Material Mapping of Magic for the Mundies

In the opening volume of *Fables* (issues 1–5) readers encounter some of the fundamental elements of the *Fables* universe ([8], p. 5–11). Fabletown is concealed in New York City. This secret stronghold is where a host of characters from folklore, myth, and legend have fled their homelands and learn to live near ordinary people, known as the “mundies”. As Andrea Miller observes in her 2002 review of the opening issues of *Fables*, this retreat in New York City is “the most striking reference to ethnicity” with “conditions [similar to] the Jewish Diaspora” ([9], p. 253). Some conservatives have applauded while some liberals have decried *Fables* for what they perceive as a Pro-Israel stance.³ Behind the invasion of the homelands is the Adversary, a shadowy figure whose mystique is at first reminiscent of Satan or the Dark Lord or Mordor, though his identity is eventually revealed as Geppetto. Yes, the same character who constructed Pinocchio. Speaking of the doll who had wanted to be a boy, Pinocchio is an example of Willingham choosing to include fantasy literature that is not strictly folkloric but resonates with traditional fabulism in its use of magic and impact on literary culture.⁴ Indeed, it is quite clear that “Willingham’s choice and expansion of the term ‘fable’ as opposed to ‘fairy tale’ is arguably to draw from a larger frame of reference” ([12], p. 97). Like Pinocchio, Willingham also includes materials from other fairy-tale literary fantasies, such as Lewis Carroll’s *Alice and Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* as well as Frank Baum’s *Oz* books. The vorpal blade of Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” is used by Little Boy Blue to dispatch the huge wooden demon that Geppetto has fashioned as the public form of the Adversary ([13], p. 169). Fabletown itself, as Zolkover observes, is “quite literally at the crossroads between a folkloristic and literary genealogy [...] on the corner of Bullfinch and Kipling streets” ([2], p. 48). Reifying literary allusions by spatial representation, Willingham’s comic book series revels in the comic book cross-over ethos and materializes meta-storytelling, where nothing is off limits to the creative impulse of synthetic narrative.⁵

Beyond the spatial representation of Fabletown, in his inaugural volume of *Fables*, Willingham’s treatment of Pinocchio, explores the literalism of his characters, whether drawn from folklore or print, particularly with regard to the material—and especially carnal—dynamics of magic. During “Remembrance Day” Pinocchio remarks with clear bitterness on his perfectly complected face that “I’m over three centuries old and I still haven’t gone through puberty. I want to grow up, I want my balls to drop, and I want to get laid” ([8], p. 87). This blunt confrontation with fleshly sexual identity—and also a parodic jibe at Pinocchio—is a hallmark of the rhetorical approach of *Fables*. Aside from the lush fantasy representations and the graphic violence, the direct depiction of sexuality is the reason for the warning on the back of each volume, “suggested for mature readers”. Willingham is not sanitizing, idealizing, or infantilizing fairy tales. He is doing his best to materialize them with flesh-and-blood passion and grief for an adult audience that needs something of the earthy amid the fantastic. The sometimes vociferous emphasis of sexuality rhetorically positions the *Fables* series as a vital narrative, pulsing with libido, whether for martial, marital, or metafictional adventure. It’s all mapped out on the lurid streets of Fabletown.

³ See “What Would a Conservative Comic Book Look Like” and “Fables: Just an Analogy?” [10,11].

⁴ The other well-known perpetual boy—another literary figure with fabulist dimensions, Peter Pan, was not available because of copyright challenges from the Barrie estate [1].

⁵ Alan Moore’s *The League of Extraordinary Gentleman* (1999–2007) is an important precedent to this form of comic book cross-over between genres that enlists a cast of literary characters (especially those drawn from Victorian writers like H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, Robert Louis Stevenson, and H. Rider Haggard): Allan Quartermain, Dr. Jekyll, Captain Nemo, the invisible man, etc. Also, Neil Gaiman’s *Books of Magic* (1990–1991), which features Baba Yaga, King Arthur, Lucifer, and Thomas the Rhymer is a notable example of a comic book series drawing from legendary characters and working within a comic book universe’s franchise characters—John Constantine, Dr. Occult, Dr. Fate—those of the DC property in particular.

3.1. Reclaiming an Adult Genre: Fables' Use of Violence and Sexuality

Fables' emphasis on sexuality, violence, and parody of fairy-tales partly resonates with the larger literary domain of contentious ideological appropriation of the folk tale genre. As Jack Zipes observes in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, fairy-tales were revised and repackaged by authors and educators to indoctrinate children; these redesigned fairy-tales inhabited “a type of literary discourse about mores, values, and manners so that children would become civilized according to the social code of that time. The writers of fairy tales for children *acted* ideologically by presenting their notions regarding social conditions and conflicts, and they *interacted* with each other and with past writers and storytellers of folklore in a public sphere” ([14], p. 3). By emphasizing adult features of fairy-tales in *Fables*, Willingham participates in this “literary discourse about mores, values, and manners”, though he defies the moralistic and puerile appropriation of earlier treatments of fairy-tale characters.⁶ However, *Fables* has its own ideological tendencies: libertarianism, pragmatism, and militaristic heroism emerge as respected principles. However, the *Fables* universe is not defined by moral rigidity or ideological purity so much as by hunger for power and connection. Familial loyalties trump national allegiance; individual acts of ambition and courage are effective if deployed with a sense of strategic practicality rather than dogma or obsession.

Framing these mature themes, depictions of violence and sexuality reinforce the orientation on an adult audience. Like the prose, the artwork pulls no punches: in this opening volume, the full-page illustration of Rose Red's bloody chamber contains puddles of gore from corner-to-corner. Next to the broken mirror in the upper right-hand corner of the panel, the words “No more happily ever after” drips red down the wall, lacerated with numerous bleeding cuts. This signature fairy-tale phrase challenges a conventional reader's narrative expectations, subverting complacency because of the bloody script. This morbid slash at the cliché of “happily ever after” is one of many discursive tactics Willingham employs to toy with a reader's assumption about what a fairy tale is, and how *Fables* engages provocation and innovation. Though a reader is led to expect that Rose Red has been murdered, in fact, she has conspired with her boyfriend, Jack, to stage a scam to avoid marrying Bluebeard, from whom Rose had received a generous dowry. Rose's disingenuous engagement with the infamous wife-killer always had money as its object: Jack convinced her that the funds were needed to help finance his dot.com scheme, which did not prosper. After Bluebeard learns that he has been exploited and has no recourse, we can see from his contracted eyes and lips that although he has not yet fully lived up to his villainous reputation yet in the *Fables* series, that he will later express his malignity despite the General Amnesty, and indeed he does so, targeting Snow White and Bigby.⁷

3.2. Mythic Destiny, Fairy-Tale Personalities, Crossovers, and Moral Progression in Fables

Despite such betrayals, the General Amnesty is maintained as a key civilizing institution of Fabletown, and one that continues to interrogate notions of moral rehabilitation and meaningful change. Even after his years of war against the Homelands, Geppetto is offered and accepts the General Amnesty. Mark Buckingham's artwork highlights the significance of this transcendent event by literally extending past the frame into the margins for this double-page spread. Notably, as if to visually remind us of how fairy-tale characters in the *Fables* universe can overcome their traditionally narrow roles, we see major characters in this marginal space, such as Sinbad and Rose Red on the left side and

⁶ Certainly, Willingham is not the most well-known or the first contemporary writer to have emphasized adult material in fairy tales. Many readers will be aware of fairy-tale poetry by Anne Sexton, anthologies edited by Kate Bernheimer, and collections such as Angela Carter's *The Blood Chamber* or Tanith Lee's *Red as Blood: Or Tells from the Sisters Grimm*.

⁷ Another powerful instance of Bluebeard's inner emotions showing through his facial expressions is when Bigby rebukes him for a coward: “Sure, you're a terror when gutting unarmed brides on their wedding night, or gunning down an unconscious man on a toilet. You're a coward bluebeard, hiding behind a lifetime of wealth and privilege.” Bluebeard first appears impassive, but a solitary tear trickles down his face when he stands alone on the street—a close-up panel reveals his lip-curling humiliated rage against Bigby, who has unmanned him by this veracious diatribe ([15], p. 57).

Beauty and Beast (in his dashing human form) on the right ([13], pp. 176–77). Totenkinder, who is a triumph of the General Amnesty’s enablement for meaningful rehabilitation further emphasizes the redemptive and transformative potential of the General Amnesty by her remarks about Bluebeard: “Oh, he’ll behave. We’ll get along famously, Gepetto and I” ([13], p. 177).

The institution of the General Amnesty helps explore a range of personal relationships between social and political power, native desire, spiritual redemption, and absolute evil. By focusing on the process of these characters’ changes, Willingham engages diverse perspectives on the meaning of personality. Of course, “personality” is an insufficient term when discussing a literary character—and a fairy-tale character in particular since folktale protagonists’ aspects are a nexus of plot functions, patterns, and motifs. There is generally a fixity of traits that define fairy-tale characters, and they aren’t often capable of meaningful change. If fairy tale protagonists change, it is often revelation of an underlying essence, not a true transformation. Structurally, change in fairy-tale characters connects to the plot’s movement between opposites, as Maria Tatar describes, following Max Lüthi’s concept of the folk tale feature of “‘extreme contrasts’”: “Both character attributes and social conditions can shift from one extreme to the other” ([16], p. 100). In terms of contrasts and character shifts, we tend to see that dichotomy with the consequences of diverse behavior among siblings and other rivals. As for protagonists, usually magical endowments externalize character traits rather than signal meaningful attitude changes: a maiden who by the end of the tale spills golden coins from her mouth had something beautiful and compassionate about her to begin with.⁸ An inhospitable son doesn’t become hospitable; he winds up with a toad sitting on top of his head.⁹ However, in *Fables*, meaningful change is possible, although this very fluidity has disconcerted some critics: “the characters have little connection with their predecessors beyond their names” ([12], p. 101).

On the contrary, *Fables* characters have a strong connection to “their predecessors”, and it is in response to their fairy-tale histories, that the *Fables* characters are motivated to change. It is in this regard that the importance of the General Amnesty in *Fables* cannot be overstated. The characters of Bigby (formerly the Big Bad Wolf of folkloric, storybook, and cinematic fame) and Totenkinder (the witch in “Hansel and Gretel”) epitomize the possibilities of mythic transformation that Willingham’s plot device of the General Amnesty allows for. As such two formidable embodiments of physical and magical power from the fairy-tale tradition, Willingham expands the depth of these characters through epic backstories. We learn that Bigby is the runt son of a she-wolf (Winter) and the North Wind himself. This mythic origin story is a masterstroke of improvisational mythmaking by Willingham; the character’s desire to become a legendary monster and the power of gusty wolfish breaths makes perfect sense via this hereditary etiology.¹⁰ Willingham’s conception of Bigby’s heritage also displays his syncretic ethos regarding fairy tales, which derived from his sense of crossovers in comic book culture:

That was the whole bread and butter of the two big comics’ empires, DC and Marvel [...] imagining that characters in one story would show up in another story was already second nature to me when I discovered fairy tales. The big crossover in my mind was that the same Big Bad Wolf appeared to vex poor Little Red Riding Hood and also blow down houses in the Three Little Pigs. There is nothing in those stories that led me to believe that those were different wolves. ([19], p. 40).

Willingham here expands upon the more limited concept of a comic book crossover—featuring different characters from different story worlds owned by the same company—to a larger matrix of

⁸ See “Mother Holle.” ([17], p. 81).

⁹ See “The Ungrateful Son.” ([17], p. 461).

¹⁰ The inherited nature of Bigby’s potent breath is first introduced in *Fables: Storybook Love* Vol. 3. When he protects himself and Snow White from the intrusion of Goldilocks: “I guess I never mentioned before that I’m the product of a mixed marriage. My father was the north wind—and how he met my mother and took a spark to her—” ([15], p. 139). *Fables: 1001 Nights of Snowfall* provides the details ([18], pp. 72–84).

narrative where any character in the literary and folkloric tradition can cross over to any narrative world. Drawing from this crossover ethos from comic books allows Willingham to develop a *Fables* universe of significant depth, which merges folkloric, literary, and cinematic sources. The notion of the General Amnesty harnesses the potential for these fairy tale characters crossing over to not only interact in traditional ways but to elicit new connections, relationships, and behaviors.

It is because of the premise of the General Amnesty that so many wicked or destructive characters, such as Bigby, Totenkinder, and Bluebeard, coexist with little Boy Blue, Cinderella, Snow White, *etc.* However, as Martin and Karasek observed, these fairy-tale villains are very different at times from their prior incarnations in fairy-tale lore, and it is instructive to compare their individual development. Bigby struggles with his wolfish identity, and he reverts back to lupine form, such as to threaten Bluebeard when he threatens to torture Jack. In his turn, Bluebeard goads Bigby: “Oh look. After all these years, the wolf has finally shed his sheep’s clothing to once more show us the true beast underneath. Most of us knew it was only a matter of time before you reverted to your old ways, Bigby. Nature cannot be denied” ([8], p. 65). However, Bluebeard’s essentialist claim is reductive; Bigby does contain himself and rebukes Bluebeard for his brutal intentions with Jack: “That’s not the way we do things anymore” ([8], p. 66). Nevertheless, these character interactions reveal the discrepancy between the General Amnesty as a political reality and a personal conviction. Free will is the bridge that Willingham indicates makes a personal transformation convincing, not the political decree itself.

4. Martial Masculinity Meets Community Responsibility: Plotting Subversions of Heroism in Fables

Willingham presents Bigby as an example of a character who is willing to accept the ideal of the General Amnesty and willfully struggle with his destructive passions in contrast to Bluebeard, who conceals his disloyalty and after several betrayals of Fabletown, joins the forces of the Adversary. This is a far cry from Bigby, who not only takes human form as much as he can stand in Fabletown (all the better to perform his role as Sheriff on the down low rather than blowing his cover with big eyes, big nose, or big teeth) but also manifests human emotions. Bigby falls in love with Snow White and develops a sense of responsibility for the Fabletown community. These testaments to virtue in Bigby, do not simply seem to be indications of his capacity for change, but rather to express the nobler potential of his mythic being. In his capacity of Sheriff and commanding advisor regarding the Adversary, Willingham imbues Bigby with a heroic aura befitting the son of a god—the North Wind.

In much of the first-half of the *Fables* series, Bigby manifests his heroism through military conflict, whether in flashbacks during America’s participation in World War II or the main war in the *Fables* universe against the Adversary. In his physical profile, Bigby channels well-known icons of masculinity from the comic-book world of super-heroes and the cinematic genre of noir hard-boiled detectives: Wolverine and Sam Spade. He’s impressively muscular, smokes frequently, wears a drab trench-coat, and displays shaggy long hair, a perpetual five-o-clock shadow, and scowl on his hirsute face. Bigby’s masculine militarism has alarmed some critics, particularly because of the danger of glorifying war in a simplistic fashion. Mark Hill decries Bigby because of how he epitomizes “the stiflingly rigid masculinity that is privileged within the text” and serves to promote a conservative political perspective on war ([20], p. 182). In particular, Hill is “disquieted” by how Willingham “invokes the cultural memory of the masculine hero-soldier in a war worth fighting” ([20], p. 186). Hill asserts that “if *Fables* is a magic mirror held to American society, then it displays a country that glories war and the soldiers who fight them” ([20], p. 192). There is no denying that Bigby’s depiction in *Fables* often glorifies militaristic and nationalistic masculinity. Willingham himself asserts that superhero comic books need to maintain American values. In “Superheroes: Still Plenty of Super but Losing Some of the Hero” Willingham explains how when having the opportunity to write about Batman and Robin he made sure that they performed as “good, steadfast heroes, with unshakable personal codes and a firm grasp of their mission”. Yet, Willingham distinguishes between the ambiguous world of *Fables* and nationalistic superhero comic-books: “There’s [...] room for [...] moral ambiguity, and the eternal

struggle of imperfect people trying to find their way in a bleak and indifferent world. I plan to continue all of that and more in my *Fables* series. But for me at least the superhero genre should be different, better, with higher standards, loftier ideals [...] [21]. To what degree Willingham succeeded with a more ambiguous nuanced world in *Fables* is debatable, but analyzing the totality of the series, rather than a single moment in the storyline does suggest that the depiction of militarism and masculinity evolved as the plotline transformed from a goal-oriented conflict-based scenario to an exploration of the connections in a community defined by diverse personalities, ideologies, and genders.

Fables representation of military masculinity is not static, nor is the series' engagement with gender roles. Hill identifies how Snow's independence shifts towards subservience in the context of her relationship with Bigby. However, Hill's article was written before significant changes occurred in the storyline that marginalized the male characters and revealed the female fables as the primary movers and shakers of Fabletown and the larger universe. Hill also recognizes Bigby as a "tool of civilization" after his romance with Snow White and her "spell allowing him to shift between wolf and human at will" ([20], p. 184). The truth of the larger trajectory of the *Fables* story is that Bigby becomes a tool for "civilization" but also vendettas and internecine war because of the manipulations and magic of the more dominant female fables. After his defeat in battle by Brandish, who turns him into a glass statue that he promptly shatters, Bigby returns from the afterlife and is controlled by first Mrs. Spratt and then Rose Red, until she abandons the conflict against her sister, Snow. If one frames the final conflict in gendered terms, this last war in *Fables* is not won by masculine force but by feminine recognition of the importance of community after the fetish of militarism is discarded. Even in the earlier war against the Adversary, Willingham's story offered indications that masculine militarism was destructive and antithetical towards long-term survival. Although Prince Charming offered one of the *Fables* series most sexist equations between military force and sexual conquests ("whether it involves a desperate war or a woman's virtue, I always win my battles"), it is through his self-sacrifice first of his looks and then his life that Prince Charming makes his final contribution to the preservation of Fabletown ([13], p. 143). Boy Blue perishes soon afterwards as well. There may be glory in the death of heroes, but by the later volumes of the *Fables* series, the absence of leading men becomes quite obvious as is the implicit message, whether approved by Willingham's conscious mind or not: a community that bases its ethos on perpetual armed conflict will not endure. While Hill's general remarks on the *Fables* series' initial exaltation of war and masculinity are incisive and apt, the resolution of the story by Rose and Snow's sororial agreement rather than male conquests dilutes the importance of militaristic and heroic masculinity. The martial prowess that Bigby, Prince Charming, and Boy Blue once represented becomes overshadowed by the enduring connections of the extended *Fables* family, a community where Rose and Snow reconcile. The recognition of the primacy of civilized communal obligations subverts pretensions of heroic masculinity.

The capacity for civilizing change is perhaps most explicit when Bigby spends some time in heaven after losing his life (temporarily), Boy Blue informs him that his love for Snow White has transformed his destiny: "You fight for Snow and the cubs, and beyond that, for those who matter to you. That's the sole rhyme and reason of the universe. [...] If there is a greater intent, it isn't going to be imposed on you—on us. You get to decide what that will be, all by yourself. Freedom sucks, huh?" ([22], pp. 115–16). Bigby still is capable of violence, but it's meaningful violence because it's focused on preservation of his family and friends, not conquest or even national defense of an abstract ideal. Blue's words emphasize a spiritual existentialism underlying the *Fables* universe. Autonomy and connection supersede other factors. The General Amnesty helps foster an environment for these characters to connect personal autonomy with communal responsibility.

5. Double Double Toil and Trouble? Brewing Feminine Darkness and Occult Redemption in *Fables*

Similar to Bigby's commitment to Fabletown and his family, Totenkinder demonstrates the tendency to revere pragmatism for survival of a meaningful community. She employs her occult

mastery to help divine specific threats and to formulate magical solutions. As the greatest non-divine magic-user in the *Fables* universe, Totenkinder emerges as an archetype of personal sacrifice in the service of esoteric power. In “The Witch’s Tale” of *1001 Nights of Snowfall* not only does Willingham present how Totenkinder is integrated into Fabletown (Snow White and Rose Red discovered her still-living burned body in the oven in her hut), but he depicts the epochal depth of her magical power: “I was born into the fog mountain tribe, seven years after the ice retreated from our current home. I became a woman in my fourteenth summer [...] When my first moon’s blood came, I began to have the seeings and premonitions” ([18], p. 98). Gifted by second-sight tied to feminine sexuality, the young Totenkinder is a prodigy, who helps guide the tribe by predicting the migration of game and the outcome of natural disasters. However, she does not foresee the consequence of a battle between her tribe and another, resulting in her husband, the Chief’s Son, marrying the daughter of the rival Chief in order to avoid further conflict. She is outcast to the wilderness and sacrifices her baby: “I could never survive on my own, unless I found more power than the moon’s blood could provide. [...] Any spirits of sky and moon and stars, behold the gift I give thee. ‘And Power Came. In Abundance’” ([18], p. 103). Thus, Totenkinder’s desire for the lives of children is elevated to a self-conscious strategy of ritual empowerment that she needs to survive in a patriarchal world. Her powers grow with more sacrifices, and she achieves revenge, as well as virtual immortality: “Sacrificing two a year, I stopped aging” ([18], p. 104). We watch her progress through the ages—her involvement in several well-known tales of magical obstacles and enchantments, such as “The Three Billy Goats Bluff”, “The Frog Prince”, “Rapunzel”, and “Beauty and the Beast”. Willingham emphasizes Totenkinder is always the unnamed witch in tales, much like Jack is the ubiquitous young hero.

Hearing Totenkinder’s biography, Snow White distrusts her nature, and does not want to take her to Fabletown and recruit her to help against the Adversary, but Rose Red is powerfully moved, as Snow White in her role of frame-narrator emphasizes: “She was always the one who adopted injured animals and broken-winged birds, nursing them back to health” ([18], p. 112). Totenkinder ends up being not only a powerful ally against the Adversary but also against Fabletown’s even greater enemy, Mr. Dark—although she is defeated during the confrontation. It is a poignant example of the psychic depth of Totenkinder that when she gathers her magical weapons to use *versus* Mr. Dark that the “oldest shape” she summons is “the altar stone on which I first sacrificed the life of my own child”—she calls this stone “damnation” and lays her withered hand upon it: “and Regret” ([23], p. 67). Willingham does not seek to evade, dismiss, or condemn the moral darkness that Totenkinder navigates; it is right in the open. This direct engagement with the terrible costs of power is one of the underlying themes of the *Fables* series. Rose Red and Snow White themselves are learning about these costs to the psyche and soul, and it is telling that because of Rose’s inclination, Totenkinder joins the two sisters. Together this trinity of powerful and conflicted women leaves in search of Fabletown, where the past is allegedly forgiven.

6. “No Friend Like a Sister”? Shadows of Tradition Fall between Snow White and Rose Red

Willingham’s use of Snow White and Rose Red reveals his aesthetic regarding innovation and tradition, while also implying possible oversights in distinctions between literary and folkloric sources. Willingham indicates in Volume 2 of *Fables* that Rose Red is a marginal figure in print and popular culture compared to her sister: “They keep making their godawful animated movies and writing their endless children’s stories about you. So you can’t die! They’ll never let you! But who remembers me?” ([24], pp. 108–9). The resentment of Rose Red is a compelling example of the deep and conflicted feelings that Willingham imbues his characters with, and as Zolkover recognizes, the *Fables* characters offer “psychic depth” that is quite a departure from the tenets of Max Lüthi regarding the “depthlessness” of the fairy-tale protagonist ([2], p. 42; [26], p. 11). This psychological depth provides greater resonance for the characters’ actions and reknits the web of their connections, combining folkloric and literary precedents with further narrative development.

6.1. Sibling Rivalry vs. Canonical Accuracy: Rose Red's Grievance Against Snow White's Popularity

Rose's complaint against her sister is neither canonical nor accurate. Recent texts do pay homage to the both sisters, and there's a groundswell of interest in Rose Red, including Disney's announcement about an upcoming film [26]. Cristina Bacchilega in "Fairy-tale Adaptations and Economies of Desire" analyzes a range of literary treatments, such as Margo Lanagan's novel, *Tender Morsels* (2008) and Francesca's Lia Block's "short story 'Rose' (2000)" ([27], pp. 87, 90). Willingham's treatment of the Snow White and Rose Red tales to build up sibling rivalries challenges the sororial harmony that Bacchilega observes in those sources: "Their temperamental difference is not the marker of rivalry or a binary opposition, but of their complementarity; and because she is always with Snow White, Rose Red's propensity for wandering and gathering flowers has not the same valence as Little Red Riding Hood's erring off the path" ([27], p. 81).

Bacchilega's emphasis on these two harmonious sisters underscores Willingham's divergent choices. Although Bacchilega invokes "Little Red Riding Hood" as a contrast to Rose Red, in *Fables* we see Rose Red displaying erring behavior throughout the series. Furthermore, although she does not choose an animal consort, she does gravitate towards the Farm, as the wilder alternative to Fabletown. In addition, not only does the wolfish villain of the "Little Red Riding Hood" tale emerge as a mate for Snow White, but these two sisters become rivals who end up commanding armies in their adversarial opposition. Willingham subverts the assumptions of educated readers like Bacchilega about the idyllic sisterhood of Snow White and Rose Red. Much like the *Fables* tendency to undercut the proverbial "happily ever after", the comics reverse and recontextualize conventional impressions about these fairy tale characters.

6.2. Opposites Distract: Adversarial Sisterhood and Gender Diversity with Rose Red and Snow White

Bacchilega only notes *Fables* in passing—paraphrasing the work of Andrew Friedenthal, who analyzes additional adaptations of the Snow White and Rose Red characters, and points out that "More modern figurations of Rose Red demonstrate how contemporary writers interpret her and use this dichotomy [between Rose Red and Snow White] as a kind of shorthand to explore diverse expressions of femininity" ([27], p. 173). *Fables* exemplifies these "diverse expressions", and Friedenthal gives *Fables* special attention in his article's conclusion: "*Fables* offers an extreme exception to a general pattern—Rose Red is silenced by the very fact that she is the symbolic representation of a dangerous, active woman, a femme fatale to Snow White's innocent persecuted heroine" ([27], p. 178). In his footnotes, Friedenthal offers a quotation from *Fables* where Rose explains how she's "grown out of the habit of sleeping with girls" ([28], Note 7, p. 178). Beyond her sexual activity, Rose Red transgresses conventional boundaries throughout the *Fables* series. From her short red hair to her bold fascination with the illicit—faking her murder and stringing along Blue Beard for his money. Rose's incarnations challenge gender norms.

If Snow White's elegant depiction as director of Fabletown continues to some degree the tradition of regal beauty, moral purity, and familial focus, Rose Red presiding over the Farm is very much the heroine of twenty-first-century taboo-breaking heroic femininity. On the level of visual depictions alone, whether Rose wears punk clothes, business wear, no clothes at all¹¹, or dons traditionally masculine tools of arms and armor, signaling fairy-tale heroism—she maintains one of the strongest personalities among the *Fables*. Like her appearance, Rose's actions express a diverse array of heroism, morality, and gender roles. She betrays her sister by having sex with Prince Charming, runs a commune of animal fairy-tale characters at the Farm, breaks Blue Boy's heart because he wants more than friendship, raises an army, ascends to the throne of Camelot, defies and devours the Goddess Hope, and ultimately decides to end the family vendetta. Rose spares not only her sister's life but the integrity of the *Fables*

¹¹ Zolkover analyzes Rose Red's "state of undress or half-dress" as well as that of Goldilocks—indicating they are prime examples of how Willingham corporealizes initially abstract fairy-tale characters ([2], pp. 46–48).

world—all because she comes to feel compassion for the lives of Bigby and Snow’s children is more important than her ambition to consolidate matrilineal power in her own person. In a metafictional flourish, the writer of the “History of Fables in the Mundy World” turns out to be one of these children.

Rose Red’s speech to her sister about how much she envies Snow White’s popularity highlights one of the central metaphysical principles of *Fables*: a fairy-tale character’s popularity among the Mundies determines her or his constitution. The most popular fables (like Goldilocks, Jack, Bigby, and Snow White) recover from ghastly injuries, and even death. Despite Rose’s outrage about her sister’s popularity (so popular is she that she recovers from a gunshot to the head), Willingham nevertheless makes Rose Red one of the primary characters in the *Fables* series. Not only does Rose Red’s murder mystery inaugurate the *Fables* series, but her fated epic struggle with her sister, Snow White, becomes the crowning conflict near the close of *Fables*.

As established, Willingham’s emphasis on this sisterly feud transforms the dynamics of these sisters’ storybook rapport; *Fables* stresses their competitiveness and mutual resentment rather than the idealized unity they manifest in Grimm’s tales, and the Grimm’s source material, Caroline Stahl’s “The Ungrateful Dwarf”. Reading Rose Red’s words in *Fables*, a reader might get misled about the genesis of the tale of Snow White: “It used to be Snow White and Rose Red. Now it’s just Snow White, period. All alone! No sister needed or desired” ([24], p. 109). “Snow White and Rose Red” is categorized as ATU 426, “The Two Girls, the Bear, and the Dwarf”, and “Little Snow White” is ATU 709—following the classic elements readers are well familiar with [29]. Beyond the tale-type distinctions, there is the matter of chronology: despite Rose’s objections to the contrary, “Little Snow White” appears in the first edition of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (1812), while “Snow White and Rose Red” did not appear till the third edition in 1837. The story itself, according to Jack Zipes in *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition*, has “no known previous oral versions, but Grimm’s text has fostered numerous versions since its publication” ([30], p. 772). This example of the porous borders of folklore and literature is intriguing, but the fact remains that Caroline’s Stahl’s “The Ungrateful Dwarf” (“Der undankbare Zwerg”)—published in 1818—was not folklore, and to equate its status with that of “Little Snow White” is erroneous conflation, though it is not altogether clear if that is Willingham’s error, or merely an intensification of Rose Red’s self-righteous hyperbole. And, it’s certainly not Willingham’s purpose or responsibility in *Fables* to separate print and oral sources. Yet, if Willingham had been aware of “The Ungrateful Dwarf” as the genesis for the “Snow White and Rose Red” story in Grimm, one wonders why he didn’t integrate that aspect into the sisterly tensions; this further neglect in popular culture would have been fodder for Rose Red’s complaints.

Whether or not Willingham knew that “The Ungrateful Dwarf” preceded the Grimm’s “Snow White and Rose Red”, his portrayal of the two sisters relies on elements of both the Grimm and Stahl narratives. In the Grimm’s tale Rose Red is an outdoorsy free spirit while Snow White is dutiful and domestic:

They were two as pious, good, industrious, and amiable children, as any that were in the world; only Snow-white was more quiet and gentle than Rose-Red. For Rose-Red would run and jump about the meadows, seeking flowers, and catching butterflies, while Snow-White sat at home helping her Mother to keep house, or reading to her, if there were nothing else to do” ([31], p. 656).

Readers are overloaded with images of domestic purity as the two sisters sit “on the hearth” with their Mother: “By their side, too, lay a little lamb, and on a perch behind them a little white dove reposed [sic] with her head under her wing” ([31], p. 659). From Stahl, it appears Willingham may have extrapolated upon the idea that Snow White and Rose Red had other siblings, as the very first line of “The Ungrateful Dwarf” highlights, “A very poor couple had many, many children, and they had great difficulty feeding them all” ([30], p. 772).

Although Willingham presents a flashback retelling the Grimm tale of “Snow White and Rose Red” that focuses on just the two sisters in *Fables Volume 15: Rose Red*, Willingham develops the

adversarial dynamics of Snow White and Rose Red by inventing a backstory later in the *Fables* series (*Fables Volume 21: Happily Ever After*) that involves a larger family: specifically how the mother of Rose Red and Snow White had many sisters, all of whom had magical powers and that each time one sister kills another, she gains the accumulated power [32,33]. Rose and Snow's mother is horrified when she gives birth to twins: "One will surely die and one will bear the sin of fratricide" ([32], p. 186). The Stahl story is a likely candidate for the notion of the larger family drama lurking in the past and the threat of insufficient resources to go around—whether nutritional or magical—for "feeding them all". In *Fables* Rose literally eats the goddess Hope, once Rose has reduced her form to a moth-sized shape. Thus, the classic primal motivation of hunger in fairy-tales appears incarnate in Rose and Snow's competition for supremacy, just as the threat of masculine predation—even so far as it affects one's own family—is manifest in Bigby's wolfish impulses gone amuck, and Snow has to be prepared to kill him to save her children from paternal cannibalism. When Rose spares the children, returns to Bigby the magic ring that was manipulating him, and ends the sisterly rivalry by self-exile, the internecine threat is resolved.

6.3. Dwarfish Aggression and Disconcerting Vengeance: *Fables'* Uneasy Exploration of Rape and Disability

Fables introduces another innovation into the world of storytelling about Snow White, in the form of sexual masculine predation—as well as female confrontation and individuation. Snow White pursues a vendetta against the seven dwarves. This is another instance of how Willingham may have drawn from Stahl as well as the first edition of Grimm tales or even variants. In Stahl's "the Ungrateful Dwarf" we see dwarfish aggression when the dwarf that the sisters had tried to help attempts to escape from the bear by suggesting the sisters would be a better option: "Oh, dear merciful bear, don't eat me! I'll even give you my sacks of gold, pearls, and jewels. Do you see the girls over there? They are young and juicy and tender. They are much more of a tasty morsel than I am. Take them instead and eat them!" ([30], p. 773). This dwarf's aggression reverses conventional expectations that a supernatural being in a fairy-tale will be grateful to a compassionate protagonist. There is no reward to be had in this case until the dwarf's death. Also, there's an added sense of taboo and transgression against familial safety when the dwarf tells the girls not to involve paternal assistance: "Snow White offered to run quickly to her home, and fetch her father, but the dwarf forbade this" ([30], p. 772). This attempt to separate the sisters from the benign influence of their father implies that the dwarf has ill-intent. Dwarves with malign intent towards Snow White have a precedent in Grimm. The notes to "Little Snow White" reveal a variant of the tale whose synopsis indicates that like the brothers who only spare their sister when she agrees to domestic duties in "The Twelve Brothers" the seven dwarves are intent on killing Snow White before she agrees to tend the house.¹²

Willingham's decision to develop the dwarves as sinister creatures capable of violence may not have relied upon tale variants but cinema. In the Disney film of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, there is the threat of violence against Snow White by the dwarves; we hear the dwarves say "chop it to pieces", "kill it dead", and "let's kill it when it wakes up", when they seek to dispatch the intruder that may be a "monster" and is sleeping in one of their beds. However, their hostility is based on fear, and once Snow White is revealed in her beauty, the dwarves lower their pick-axes. Regardless of any particular prompting from cinema, literature, or folklore, Willingham chose to make the seven dwarves despicable, and in the collection of *Fables* backstories, *1001 Nights of Snowfall*, Willingham reveals how Snow White pursues and kills each of the seven dwarves because they had raped her.¹³

¹² "c. In the third version [...] seven dwarfs live in a cave and kill any maiden who comes near them. [...] they want to kill her [Snow], but because she is so beautiful, they let her live, and in exchange for their mercy they say that she should keep house from them" ([17], p. 494).

¹³ Zolkover had probably not yet had the chance to read *1001 Nights of Snowfall* (2006) because his article (2008) does not cite the volume, and he suggests the mention of the dwarves in the first volume was an indication of "sexual implications"—not knowing the more disconcerting matter of sexual assault explored elsewhere—"making the taboo" about "sexual implications" with the dwarves a mere "narrative device" whereby "the comic book is explicitly, and quite loudly,

While this empowers Snow White as a character capable of administering her own vengeful ambitions, some readers may cringe from the depiction of dwarves as rapists. This macabre rendering of dwarfish sexual assaults contains something of the prejudicial “logic of superstition” that Tobin Siebers identifies as a hallmark of fantastic depictions of the Other, which Siebers argues is implicitly an “act of exclusion” used to validate “false differences among men” ([34], pp. 34, 56). Although Willingham is working with a tradition of literature and folklore that entails dwarves as chthonic and sometimes dangerous beings, Siebers reminds us that traditions carry with them their own dangerous legacy of social prejudices.

The revelation of Snow White’s vengeance against the malignant (and perhaps maligned) dwarves is narrated in *1001 Nights of Snowfall*. The frame story imitates the famous *Tales of A Thousand and One Nights*, but instead of Scheherazade, it is Snow White who has to make a positive impression on a Sultan and avoid the well-known fate of the previous wives, for though she is divorced from Prince Charming—and not a virgin—this Sultan threatens her with the same gruesome fate. The reason for her audience with the Sultan is that she seeks an alliance with him against the forces of the Adversary that continue to oppress the homelands of the fables. She prefaces her tale about the dwarves with the description that it is “my own small tale of revenge and its terrible lessons” ([18], p. 21). The tale itself concerns Snow White’s request for fencing lessons after her marriage to the prince, who had promised her anything she “desired as a wedding gift” ([18], p. 25). Since Prince Charming himself is reputed to be the deadliest swordsman around, he personally gives Snow the lessons, albeit privately, because he emphasizes that “sword-fighting isn’t a fit activity for ladies of the gentry—for any woman in fact” ([18], p. 26). Despite the prince’s objections, he trains Snow effectively, and over time her skills significantly improve. Meanwhile, hacked-up bodies accumulate from a particular group of seven dwarves—brothers known to have occupied one of the “diversion cabins” where human women were regularly abused ([18], p. 40). As the prince concludes at the end, although he took steps for a known murderer to take the fall to avoid open war with the king of the dwarves, he recognizes that “by the final murders, the killer needed only a single thrust to do his mortal work—as if he were inexperienced at first, but perfecting his deadly art all along. Much like your progress in our fencing lessons—and remarkably, over the same time” ([18], p. 53). The Sultan, after hearing this tale wonders why this storyteller—Snow White in disguise—had described it as an example of the dangers of revenge, and Snow explains that the woman’s “husband never quite trusted her again. One version of the story has it that their marriage ended when he slept with the princess’s sister, newly arrived to be a companion to her. But wiser listeners might conclude that the marriage really ended on the day she set out to become a destroyer” ([18], p. 55). Snow’s inclusion of her ex-husband’s adultery with her sister, reinforces the competitive tensions between Rose Red and Snow White, and the thematic emphasis in *Fables* on emotional consequences of violent power. The narrative closure of achieved vengeance remains fraught with these disconcerting feelings of distrust, destruction, and demonized disability.

6.4. Comic-Book Aesthetics for Snow White and Rose Red: Panel Portrayals of Memory and Personality

The artwork in *Fables* is deployed with both intense emotion and subtle indications of psychic depth for the characters, and the memories shared by Snow White and Rose Red is a compelling example of this dynamic.¹⁴ Near the end of the second *Fables* volume, *Animal Farm*, Rose Red reveals the motive for the affair to Snow when she explains that much of her anger against her sister stems from Snow’s lack of attachment to her ([24], p. 108). Forming the middle panel of the page there’s a picture of Snow White and Rose Red as young girls, and there are no borders whatsoever, evoking a

mum” ([2], p. 44). In fact, Snow’s silence and expression of revulsion was an important foreshadowing of the later revelation of her violent and righteous revenge against those dwarves.

¹⁴ Karin Kukkonen in “Comics as a Test Case for Transmedial Narratology” offers a rewarding analysis of the role of art in the *Fables* series, particularly for *Fables Volume Seven: Arabian Nights (and Days)*. Kukkonen emphasizes how that volume “draws on earlier versions of *Arabian Nights*, particularly the nineteenth-century fairy book and its illustrations, remediating and recontextualizing their storyworld and characters” ([35], p. 35).

sense of limitless white space, along with the roses and flowers and butterflies flapping beside the girls, whose hands are clasped in fellowship. The text in that white space beside the flashback represent Rose Red's words to Snow at the farm: "When we were young, back in the cabin, we pledged we'd be together forever. You and me against the world. . . . **remember?**" ([24], p. 109). The smiles on the girls' faces in that telling middle panel are complimentary: Snow has an open-mouthed smile, while Rose sports a closed-mouth grin; Snow has pig-tails and Rose has curls on top of her head; their clothes have some variation with geometric parallels to indicate separate yet compatible personalities that remain in harmony. The idyllic contrast with the rest of the panels where the adult women scowl at each other—Rose with tears in her eyes and Snow with glassy perplexity. Rose alludes then to how "the moment your pretty Prince Charming came along, you rode off with him, without so much as a backward glance" ([24], p. 109). Snow counters with how she soon asked Rose to live with them, but we know from the *1001 Nights of Snowfall* that invitation came from Prince Charming's notion that Snow needed a companion after she had shown herself errant in her act of revenge against the dwarves. Rose also confirms that as Snow suggests, she had "seduced him [Prince Charming] and ruined [Snow's] marriage—all to punish [her]" ([24], p. 109). It is not until volume fifteen, entitled *Rose Red*, that Rose's psychic wound is partly healed by the ghost of Colin—the pig beheaded by Goldlocks—who takes the form of Rose's mother and shares with her Snow White's perspective on the painful legacy of the past. These two sisters only approach healing after many obstacles and battles of personality.

7. Playing the Trickster: Willingham's Metafictional Improvisations of *Jack of Fables*

Healing is not in the final focus, however, in *1001 Nights of Snowfall*, where after having heard Snow White's tale of the dwarves, the Sultan remains ignorant that the tale is so personal. His response underscores the enthusiasm of Willingham (and many folklorists) that "Every good story has a hundred different versions, Snow. That's what makes them endlessly wondrous and delightful" ([18], p. 55). This metafictional gesture towards folklore's diverse variety stresses the many levels of framing, innovation, and syncretic connection in the *Fables* universe, whereby a multiplicity of perspectives—from the medieval to the modern—are engaged through fresh reconsiderations of the role of gender, sex, family, evil, war, and love in the classic tales. The most emphatic of Willingham's improvisational approaches to syncretism and metafiction is with *Jack of Fables*.

One of the many ways Willingham offers both innovation and depth with *Jack of Fables* is by demonstrating wide-ranging familiarity with various tales and traditions. For instance, although the casual reader has no notion of Appalachian, Southern, and Canadian Jack tales, folklorists are well-aware of the oral tradition concerning Jack in North America. We see allusions to a range of Jack's adventures in the various issues of *Jack of Fables*, and we also see the manifestations of powers that remind us of variety of Jack's folkloric adventures, such as how Jack not only speaks of "visions. Dire omens. They're indistinct and hazy, but they're true. I can sense it", but he has taken the shape of a dragon ([36], p. 75). Both powers are reminiscent of the Canadian Tale, "The First Time Jack Came to America" where he's able to change into a range of shapes and know everything after licking up "all the wisdom of the world" from the pot of a witch ([37], p. 214).

However, Jack's powers in *Fables* are generally much more restricted, and when he witnesses the character Raven turn into animal form, he reflects, "Who knew Raven could turn into a bird? If I could turn into a bird, I'd do it all the time" ([38], p. 79). In the folktale this is a manifestation of the motif of the magicians' duel, and we see Jack in Willingham's *Fables* indeed capable of facing off against magic-wielding opponents at times, though in his dragon-form he is doomed to be killed by his son, Jack Frost, born of the Ice Queen. Patriarchal conflicts are a familiar folkloric scenario, from the usurpation of Uranus and Cronus to the unintentional murder by Cuchulainn of his unknown son. In addition, the entire *Jack of Fables* spin-off occurs after his Fable-town exile, and these meanderings in North America are much in the spirit of the ending sentence of "The First Time Jack Came to America" as well: "And that is the story of how he came to get to America to begin with, and he's

been making it on his own ever since" ([37], p. 217). Throughout *Fables*, Jack makes his way through arrogance and serendipity, demonstrating Max Lüthi's notion of "universal interconnectiveness" in the fairy-tale world: "The hero is the lucky one. It is as if invisible ties linked him with the secret powers or mechanisms that shape the world and fate" ([25], p. 57).

There are also power dynamics that Jack engages that don't have a clear folkloric precedence: for instance, when he reveals to his traveling companions that he has a briefcase where he's hidden all the treasure recently retrieved from the lost city of gold, he explains that the briefcase became magical over time: "For years it was just a normal briefcase. But ever since I hit the road, it's just sort of...grown. Must be one of the perks of being at the center of all stories" ([38], p. 102).¹⁵ There are also plenty of folkloric elements for Jack that Willingham does not incorporate, such as the fact that despite folk tale precedents for Jack having brothers, in both British and especially American variants including Richard Chase's versions—usually named Will and Tom—Willingham does not include fraternal characters in Jack's world of *Fables*. However, one wonders if Willingham read some accounts of Jack's vices, such as alluded to in *Tellable Cracker Tales* where Annette Bruce shares a tale about the three brothers ending with Jack as a mere punch line: "Will is a failure too. But Jack? Jack never did want to be nothin' atall but a lazy, good-for-nothin' Cracker, and he shore is successful" ([40], p. 24).

In terms of sources for Willingham's Jack, besides European collections, it is most likely that Richard Chase's *The Jack Tales* (1943) is the main source, which offers a very arrogant Jack despite Chase's claims that his Jack manifests "easy-going unpretentious rural American manners that make him so different from his English cousin, the cocksure, dashing young hero" ([41], p. x). For one thing, the first panel of *Fables Three: Storybook Love* shows an old human hand holding a book entitled, "The American JACK TALES", which aside from the word "American" appears to exactly duplicate the title of Richard Chase's 1943 collection ([15], p. 7). In addition, on the credits page, which opens a double-page spread of Confederate cannon-fire against advancing Union troops, and offers the title of the original issue, "Bag of Bones", Willingham writes the following: "This story was freely adapted from a couple of the Mountain Jack Tales of American folklore. In true oral tradition, it's been much altered under my care, which is a polite way of saying that I stole everything I thought I could use, changed a bunch of stuff to suit my whims, and made up the rest.—Bill" ([15], p. 9). The ethos that Willingham expresses here is closer to modern creative writing pedagogy that encourages students to not feel guilty about borrowing or endure an undue pressure to be original: "Every artist gets asked the question, 'Where do you get your ideas?' The honest artist answers, 'I steal them.' How does an artist look at the world? First, you figure out what's worth stealing, then you move on to the next thing" ([42], p. 5). While Willingham's flippant directness towards artistic appropriation may reflect this practical vision for creative writers, the attitude may chafe contemporary folklorists, who aim to respectfully represent the oral storyteller as both a person and tradition-bearer, and even nineteenth-century folk collectors, such as the Grimms, in their first edition offered scholarly notes and variants, more intent on assembling a body of tales indicative of their speculated German folk literature rather than stealing anything per se.

Willingham's statement about stealing is a testament to his awareness that folklore is not fixed in stone, and that individual storytellers innovate within a tradition of tales and lore. The phrase "Mountain Jack Tales" might easily be translated "Appalachian Jack Tales", and indeed the subtitle of Chase's *The Jack Tales* is "Folk Tales from the Southern Appalachians". In addition, the honesty of Willingham's admission to theft and revisionism for artistic purposes may resonate with those folklorists familiar with Richard Chase's *The Jack Tales*: significant alterations of material—without such admission—is a charge levied against Richard Chase. As Carl Lindahl asserts, "Not until the

¹⁵ There are precedents for magic bags and Jack, but not this precise cause-and-effect: that a bag becomes magical because of being near Jack. One Jack tale with a magic bag is "The Magic Bag" ([39], pp. 84–86.)

appearance of a remarkable study by Charles Perdue, however, was it clear how drastically Chase had altered his oral sources" ([43], p. xxvi).

It also appears that Willingham's use of *The Jack Tales* influenced the depiction of Jack's *Fables* personality. Beyond visual and textual cues in the "Bag of Bones" issue, there are further indications of a Richard Chase model, based on the character of Jack in *Fables*, particularly his arrogance. Charles Perdue himself points out that "art follows life in Chase's tales: Jack is more than twice as likely to be a braggart than he is in the Carter/Adams tales, not inconsistent with Chase's well-known sizeable ego" ([44], p. 120). Willingham's Jack Horner is profoundly arrogant: "I am the coolest. I am the bravest. And I am absolutely the one you most want to have around when the chips are down—provided I like you" ([45], p. 25).

To return to the matter of the expanding briefcase, its powers resemble a magical bag that Jack won (and later lost in his travels) earlier in a game of cards with a bayou devil (Nick Slick) and has the quality of being bottomless ([15], pp. 10–28). However, the comparison with the earlier magical bag is not what is significant but the dynamic of mundane-to-magical transformation and what that represents in the narrative of the *Fables* universe. We've learned from the return of Goldilocks earlier that popular fable characters can return from the dead, but the notion of evolving magical properties rather than innate attributes is a hitherto unidentified feature in the *Fables* comic book series. Generally in folk tales as well, magic is an externalized gift that aids the protagonist rather than an emanation of the protagonist.¹⁶ This enchanted briefcase is a departure from these traditional metaphysics but a continuation of Willingham's endowment of a supernatural aura on his fairy-tale characters. In fact, when Jack beats Nick Slick at cards, it's not a feat that he performs through sleight-of-hand or gambling acumen; Jack beats this bayou devil by producing four jacks because Jack "never did pick up a deck of cards where he couldn't deal himself all four jacks, whenever he liked" ([15], p. 14). Thus, Jack has transformed from his roots as a plucky lad with wit and courage to become in Willingham's *Fables* a supernatural figure with essential powers, not merely aided by magical helpers and objects.

The concept of character-based enchantment and magical expansion of space achieves its logically ultimate conclusion in the last look at Jack's character, which occurs *after* the seemingly final moment when his ghost emerges from his corpse and slips away from the five diabolic figures who are seeking to collect on Jack's various debts ([35], p. 138). The true close for the character of Jack does not occur until the penultimate volume of *Fables* where this closing crossover episode of Jack interrupts the showdown between Snow White, Rose Red, and Bigby. We learn that Jack in his phantom form did not escape the five devils, but that they caught him when he was hitchhiking, and then they decided his punishment: "They argued for a while over which of their hells I'd go to and finally decided to get together and make a special hell just for me. To wit: to sit alone on an empty planet with nothing to do but think about everything I'd done wrong" ([33], p. 174). In fact, Jack ends up making a brand new universe along the lines of exactly what he wants. His purgatory becomes pure paradise. Ego unlimited. Heaven equates with narcissistic tall-tale telling.

On the one hand, Jack's besting of the diabolic characters is in keeping with both folkloric and literary tradition. Reading the Brothers Grimm, for example, one finds protagonists in the devil tales evade soul-crushing consequences by trickery or the mere good fortune that the devil has his designs on a longer con game with someone else. As for literary examples, Basil Davenport points out that out of his twenty-five anthologized stories in *Deals with the Devil*, "the mortal gets the better of the Devil in thirteen stories, and loses in twelve" ([46], p. xvi). On the other hand, the precise nature of Jack's solipsistic solution to his diabolic punishment is unparalleled in folkloric tradition, but is a commentary on critical framing by collectors.

¹⁶ Willingham does not limit this power solely to Jack either: a parallel of how it is the fairy-tale characters themselves that produce enchantment occurs with Rose Red when she learns that the forest she grew up in with Snow White was not magical in its own right but as an emanation of her own being: "You bled magic into the surroundings, rather than the reverse" ([32], p. 138).

To understand Jack's solution to his predicament—and one of the ways that Willingham most profoundly and explicitly engages metafiction—it is important to realize that part of Willingham's engagement with folklore in his *Fables* universe is a critique of bowdlerization. The spirit of censorious revision is personified by the character of Mr. Revise in *Jack of Fables* who is a powerful representative of a class of beings known as Literals—a clear manifestation of Willingham's dislike of hostility towards fantasy storytelling and certain tendencies of fairy-tale editing over the last centuries. When Jack is captured in the first issue of *Jack of Fables* it would bring a smile to many a folklorist's face to see that Jack is at first restricted to *The Golden Bough Retirement Home*, considering the range of scholarly objections to James Frazer “as an armchair anthropologist and folklorist”, the place Jack finds himself in is obviously of a highly dubious quality for a folkloric character ([47], p. 109). In this retirement center, Mr. Revise taunts Jack with how fairy-tales have changed: “Do you even remember anymore, Jack? How much more sensual it used to be? How violent? How violent? How concupiscent? My job is to neuter you; to take away all in you that is potent and fearsome. All that is memorable and distinct” ([47], p. 49). The drawings that accompany Mr. Revise's words appear in two panels in the fashion of woodcuts or 18th century broadsides: one panel depicts the Big Bad Wolf devouring a woman's body; the second panel shows fiendish-looking children—evidently Hansel and Gretel—gloating over the burned corpse of the witch. The censorious tyranny of Mr. Revise is only challenged by Jack's rebelliousness, as well as the even greater threat of the mercurial scribbler Kevin Thorn, another Literal, who plans to write the entire *Fables* universe away. In *Fables: Vol. 13 The Great Fables Crossover* the plot lines of *Fables* and *Jack of Fables* converge with further revelations, such as the arrival of the Literal, Deus Ex Machina and the clever machinations of the Pathetic Fallacy (known as Gary) who helps Mr. Revise expel Kevin Thorn into a new universe where he has to contend with “one great big blank page” ([48], p. 220). The comic book presents a blank page facing this formidable Literal, while Kevin Thorn laments, “I have no idea where to begin!” ([48], p. 220). Unlike in Jack's new universe, there is no companionable Pathetic Fallacy animate the visions in Kevin Thorn's head. Willingham's utilization of these Literals shares with his audience the trials of the creative process and emphasizes his metafictional consciousness of literary criticism, existential philosophy, and most obviously, writer's block. With Jack's triumph against the adversarial limits of the Literals and the punitive constraints of the devils, Willingham harnesses metafiction to construct a story that breaks the fourth wall, repudiates prudish censorship, and builds a network of transcendent storytelling, which navigates through moral, chronological, and metaphysical obstacles in fairy-tale discourse.

Beyond Willingham's engagement with Jack, there is further Americana that he utilizes for metafictional purposes in *Fables*. It is because of Mr. Revise that both Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox have been reduced in size; however, regardless of the sinister agenda of some of the Literals, Willingham himself takes liberties with Babe in ways that are revisionist as well. Babe becomes a kind of Walter Mitty, who adopts various roles. He serves as a pacing mechanism and comic relief for the more dramatic plots. Also, despite having survived the attempts of the metafictional nemesis—Mr. Revise—Babe himself crosses the border between the comic narrative and the audience when in the penultimate volume he threatens the reader:

Now I come to find out that when a comic book ends, all of the characters in it cease to exist! [...] So here's what's going to happen. I'm going to sit here and eat these pizzas and drink all this Tab. And you are going to do exactly nothing. See, if you don't turn this page, then you can't finish reading the story. And if you don't finish reading the story, then the story can never end. So you're going to leave the book exactly where it is, and back away slowly. And then I and all your beloved *Fables* and *Mundys* and *Literals* and *Whatchamadoos* will live on forever. You didn't want *Fables* to end, right? Well now it never will.” ([33], p. 71).

Accompanying this threatening rhetoric is a sinister man in a dark coat who pulls a revolver out and the final panel of this page is pointed at the reader. In addition, the narrative inset in the right-hand bottom corner proclaims, “Why chance it? Do what the little Ox says!” ([33], p. 71). This admonition is

about one-third of the way through the volume, and one wonders if even a single *Fables* reader decided to capitulate to Babe's demands after this ominous and comedic breaking of the fourth wall.

8. Superteams and Super Crossovers: Willingham's Genre-Hopping Narrative Dynamics

Significantly, the opening of the penultimate volume of *Fables* highlights allusive metafiction with the title "Bigby Wolf and the Blustery Day: Chapter Four of *Happily Ever After*". One thinks of the children's book *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day* as well as reflecting upon the opening volume of *Fables* where Rose Red and Jack had drawn in blood, "No More Happily After". Willingham is clearly broadcasting his metafictional mode—signaling complicity between reader and writer with regard to the patterns of beginnings and endings, as well as the interpenetrations between folklore and literature. He emphasizes the nexus of genres from comic books to films and literature at every step of the way in the *Fables* universe, but it is especially near the end where we reach the perspective to fully fathom the depth of these allusive crossover storytelling dynamics.

Happily Ever After proceeds with other self-conscious nods to popular culture and narrative innovations as well: Osma of the Oz books joins with Beast (clad in a robotic suit, looking much like a sci-fi mech from Guillermo del Toro's *Pacific Rim*) to fight Bigby, who remains under the control of Leigh Douglas, the erstwhile wife of Jack Spratt and consort of the elementally evil Mr. Dark. Osma sports a red cape and with her hovering in mid-air evokes Supergirl [33]. The visual approximations of superheroes were used in an earlier volume as well: *Superteam*, and as Rebecca-Anne Rozario observes, the depictions of the characters engage "retro superhero-style identities and costumes" that "makes explicit the similitude between fairy tale and superhero" ([49], p. 195). We are also reminded in *Superteam* about Willingham's ethos connecting comic book crossovers and fairy tales.¹⁷

To return to the struggle between Rose Red and Snow White, we see in *Happily Ever After* this mélange of visual allusions to other comics and books, which renders the scene of conflict akin to the climatic battles between legions of superheroes, such as the X-Men or the Justice League. When the struggle with Mr. Dark has devolved into a struggle with his consort, Mrs. Spratt, Rose Red has yet to realize her hereditary vendetta against Snow White. After Bigby dispatches prior opponents, such as Beast, then Snow White prepares to defend her cubs—for her children are both capable of human and wolfish forms—against the love of her life. She is joined by her sister Rose Red, garbed in her armor of Camelot, and Bellflower (the rejuvenated form of Totenkinder), who has secretly prepared with Rose Red for the clash with Bigby, who is controlled by Mrs. Spratt (and then Rose herself later via the same magical ring). Indeed, Rose and Bellflower leave Snow White behind in the assault against Bigby, although they are not able to defeat him, partly due to the residual power of Mr. Dark that Mrs. Spratt wields. Rose herself then takes the ring and only relents in her use of Bigby as a pawn due to compassion for the children ([33,50]). The defeat of the "superteam" and the betrayal by Rose shows how Willingham subverts comic-book motifs as well as fantasy tropes: he undercuts the superteam expectations with this complicated outcome of shifting loyalties and intrigue. There is no perfect team where chaos cannot intrude and dissolve the bonding magic that crosses genres.

9. There's No Free Lunch—Or Marital Counseling—With *Fables* Libertarianism

It is not just in the domain of fairy-tale, comic-book, and literary criticism that Willingham uses *Fables* to jab at dogmatism or parody storytelling conventions. Although Zolkover insists that Willingham "exposes the rigidness and prescriptive moral didacticism of fairy-tale patriarchs like Perrault and the Brothers Grimm", in fact there are indications of social and political didacticism in the *Fables* world as well ([2], p. 48). Aside from the early prominence of masculine militarism,

¹⁷ In terms of the aesthetic of the *Fables* drawings, Rozario also points out that despite some of the series' illustrations' focus on human bodies, such as the "close-fitting" garb of Cinderella in the first volume while fencing "it is no more revealing than Bluebeard's. Her poses stress strength and confidence, not sexual availability" ([49], p. 198).

the most obvious of ideological biases in the *Fables* series, is the emphasis on libertarian attitudes towards government. In the very first issue when Beauty and the Beast ask Snow White for help in their troubled relationship, she dispatches their request based on the libertarian principle of limiting government's role in people's daily lives:

We can't afford to do marital counseling, and to be perfectly candid, I wouldn't allow it if we could. The mundanes may look to their government to solve their problems, but in the fable community, we expect you to be able to run your own lives. Our only concern is that you're currently in violation of our most vital law: no fable shall, by action or inaction, cause our magical nature to become known to the mundane world ([8], p. 9).

In her plush red chair, Snow coldly delivers this speech. The authority of this utterance is emphasized by the placard indicating "Snow White, Director of Operations". This is no mere opinionated disclosure, but the official position of Fabletown, voiced by perhaps the most famous of all fairy-tale personalities. Beyond the focus on libertarian self-sufficiency, Snow's emphasis about the "most vital law" of Fabletown underscores pragmatism. Snow's disdain for government intervention and belief in pragmatic discretion are pervasive values in the *Fables* series.

Beyond this libertarian ethos and focus on political pragmatism for survival, Willingham makes several political critiques throughout the comic book series. One of his most ferocious characters is Goldilocks, who ruthlessly pursues her ideology of a kind of mixture of animal rights and Marxism; however, her vision is subverted by her bloodthirsty tactics—rationalizing the beheading of one of the three little pigs because it "symbolized that it's time for our revolution to come out of the shadows" ([25], p. 29). Or when she's revealed as having shared the bed in a sexual manner with one of the three bears, it's an indication of "there is no superior species. Bear, human or hedgehog, it can make no difference—even in our most intimate lifestyle choices—or we're all oppressors" ([24], p. 31). It's also Goldilocks who shoots Bigby and later Snow White in the head, so despite the example of an animal and human relationship embodied by Snow and Bigby's union, Goldilocks seeks to destroy them. Clearly, Willingham is implying that despite manifestoes pretending rationalizations and passionate commitments, too many revolutionaries are merely anti-social psychopaths, bent on their own egoistical acts of vengeance.

Beyond anti-revolutionary politics, there are more specifically American matters of partisanship on display in *Fables*, such as when we learn that Pinocchio—considered an ideal candidate because of his inability to tell a lie without his nose growing—has been considering running for president of the United States, it is the republicans who successfully draft him ([51], "The Last Pinocchio Story"). Although we don't get to see Pinocchio enthroned in the White House, our current commander-in-chief (implicitly President Obama) is advised to take decisive action to deal with the imminent threat to New York due to magical warfare: "Hold off even an hour longer and it's Benghazi all over again, multiplied by hundreds—thousands probably. You can't take another hit like that. It's a guaranteed legacy-killer" ([51], "In a Castle Dark").

This stab against American foreign policy also recalls King Cole's Remembrance Day speech from the first *Fables* volume, with its echoes of Martin Niemöller's famous quote regarding passivity in the face of Hitler's nationalism: "First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Socialist" [52]. In King Cole's speech he refers to the Adversary's initial attacks against the lands of Oz and Narnia: "When the Emerald kingdom fell, we tisk-tisked and tut-tutted in our homes [...] but we weren't tempted to intervene. [...] Then the kingdom of the great lion fell, and again we did nothing, because we always found the old lion to be a bit too pompous and holier-than-thou for our tastes" ([8], pp. 82–83). The similarity is unmistakable, and the critique against political dithering is also clear. Beyond this inveighing against passivity, further equivalency is implied between the ideals of Fabletown and the West, particularly America: King Cole conferring with Snow White—also in the very first volume—refers to Fabletown as a "noble experiment" ([8], p. 58). Americans may recognize that phrase from Herbert Hoover's description of Prohibition, but it is a phrase sometimes used by pundits about America and democracy itself. In her discussions with Bluebeard about his grievance

against Jack and Rose, Snow White reminds him that “This is America, where we all have freedom of choice” ([8], p. 115).

10. Freedom in *Fables*: What’s it Good For? Defying Fairy-Tale Motifs for Identity’s Sake

Freedom of choice is validated as the chief value of the *Fables* plot because it is what saves the Fable characters when Rose Red decides to end her vendetta against her sister. Despite the Lady in the Lake’s warning to Rose Red that when she finds herself in the role of King Arthur that the Fates “are likely to step in and force everything to happen this time just like it did last time” we see that Rose navigates past the destiny of Arthurian epic as well as the matrilineal legacy of fratricide ([22], p. 151). For all its representations of battles and bloodshed, *Fables* offers closure through the development of personal autonomy in the face of ideological and magical pressures and rejects martial power in favor of reconsideration of familial and communal ties of identity.

Willingham reminds us in these numerous volumes of the tension between mythological, metafictional, and folkloric tendencies of characters following plot functions as opposed to claiming personal autonomy. While Osma laments that she “was never destined” to help defeat Mr. Dark, Pinnocchio challenges her philosophic assumptions: “What’s Destiny got to do with it? You don’t really think everything’s preordained, do you?” ([50], p. 123). Preordained or not, Bigby’s father, the North Wind, navigates past his oath “to kill my grandson” because of his duel-to-the-death against Mr. Dark: “Death cancels all obligations” ([50], p. 114). Like Bigby, who had once sworn to destroy his father because of his abandonment of his mother, the North Wind finds an option beyond formal vendetta. The North Wind’s example suggests that even one of the mightiest of mythic characters can elude the power implied by oaths by enlisting the greatest of existential limits: death. Or, to be more precise, he decides upon endless imprisonment in a casket with Mr. Dark, the most powerful evil in the *Fables* universe. North Wind decides upon imprisonment and stasis—yes—but a prison of the North Wind’s own volition—a paradox that dynamically reinforces the indelible power of a single choice to accomplish a meaningful sacrifice to protect infinite worlds whose vivid narratives entail growth, life, movement, and connection. The storybooks remain forever open.

Like so many of the best known fairy-tale protagonists—Snow White, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel, and Briar Rose—the *Fables* characters who most determine the final outcomes of the struggles of Fabletown are female. As Do Rozario concludes in her analysis of Cinderella, in “a comic series like *Fables*” Willingham’s Cinderella appears as “more than simply an object of male desire”; the series offers “a grown up, independent Cinderella [which] is required for the twenty-first century” ([49], p. 201). Beyond Cinderella, Rose Red and—of course—Snow White assert themselves throughout the *Fables* series: as Snow explains to her grown-up daughter, Therese Wolf, her focus on survival is what sustained her against the evil of the seven dwarves, and she extends her fierce resolve to her family: “I dug in deep, hardened my heart, and vowed to endure every single day, no matter what they did to me, and survive. [...] Monsters of the woods couldn’t kill me. The armies of kings, sorcerers and empires couldn’t. I’m Snow goddamn White. I look after myself. I look after my own. And I never lose” ([22], pp. 88–90). In fact, all of the major female characters display independence, competitiveness, and resolve, as do most of the males—despite Bigby’s protracted manipulation by the magical ring wielded by Mrs. Spratt and then Rose Red. Bigby contains his bestial impulses and achieves familial contentment; Snow White protects her family and successfully directs the community of Fabletown; Rose Red finds her autonomous identity separate from her sister and evades bloodshed; Jack, although banished from the very universe of other fables due to his arrogance, reconfigures the dogmatism of Satanic punishment into a paradise of his own imaginative conception. Willingham ultimately allows most of his primary fable characters to be emancipated from their fairy-tale functions, and it is that narrative liberation which permits them to attempt to live—if not happily—relatively freely based upon the passionate autonomy of their own principles ever after.

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