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Fairy Tale, by Stephen King. Reviewed by Phillip Fitzsimmons

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Stephen King. *Fairy Tale*. Scribner, 2022. 599pp. \$14.00. Reviewed by Phillip Fitzsimmons

Fairy Tale, Stephen King's latest novel that was released in September 2022 is a worthy book. Another of his approximately 600-page long stories, this one is both a page-turner and plays the reader's heart-strings. The book includes beautiful black-and-white illustrations by Gabriel Rodriguez and Nicolas Delort at the beginning of each chapter.

Warning: this review contains spoilers. They are necessary to a worthwhile discussion of the novel.

Fairy Tale is a first-person narrative of the hero, Charlie Reade (a great name for the hero in a contemporary fairy tale), who tells the story of his adventures in the fairyland named Empris when he was a 17-year-old high school student. The stakes of his adventures are high because the threat Charlie confronts in Empris will move on to our everyday world

if it is not stopped in the fairyland. This novel is a blend of traditional and contemporary fantasy story elements. King borrows from the dark side of well-known fairy tales, interweaves Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos into the composition, and, interestingly, makes many references to the culture and sayings of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) to create what I characterize as an example of urban fantasy.

Returning to my comment about the novel playing the reader's heart-strings, the book could just as easily be titled some variation of "For the Love of a Dog." The adventure begins when Charlie investigates the sounds of barking from the back of a residence known in the neighborhood as the "Psycho House". He finds Howard Bowditch, an elderly and cantankerous recluse with a compound fracture from falling off a ladder. The dog, Radar, is an aging German Shepherd who is much loved by his owner. After calling for medical help for Mr. Bowditch, Charlie volunteers to take care of Radar while her owner is hospitalized. Reade quickly comes to love the dog and becomes Bowditch's long-term recovery plan and shortly his friend. The love Bowditch and Reade share for Radar creates a trust that leads to Bowditch disclosing that there is a gateway to a fairyland named Empris inside his shed.

Empris is a typical fantasy world with medieval technology, magic, fantastic creatures (including giants, zombies, and a mermaid), a deposed royal family, and a monstrous sorcerer tyrant. A rotating sundial, guarded by a giant, can reverse, or increase the age of anyone sitting on it, like the carousel in *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, by Ray Bradbury. Bowditch shares the existence of Empris and of the sundial because Radar's health is failing, and she is expected to live only a few more days. This mutual love for the dog motivates them to work together to create and carry out the plan for Charlie to bring Radar to Empris, travel the Kingdom Road to Seafront, and hazard the giantess to reverse Radar's failing health by making her young again.

Their shared love of Radar and desire to

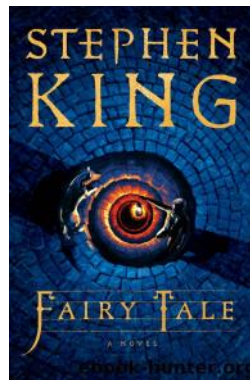
lengthen her life is the initial motivation for Charlie risking the dangers of his adventure. But, once in Empris, he meets the deposed members of the kingdom's royal family and is drawn into a larger, more significant challenge than only saving Radar's life. The stakes of the adventure rise as he acts to protect the people of Empris from the sorcerer. Charlie also prevents a future threat from the villain to his own everyday world, heals the land, and makes things right in Empris.

King's inclusion in the book of references to the culture and sayings of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) surprised me, because, while alcohol and drug abuse are common in his works, references to AA are not. An exception is the time travel novel *11/22/63* (2011) in which the hero makes regular comments about his indirect experience of AA through his ex-wife. In *Fairy Tale* its inclusion works well because it is a part of our hero's motivation for going on his adventures. Charlie's mother dies when he is seven. The father, in his grief, becomes an alcoholic who loses everything except the house they live in. Charlie bargains through prayer that he will do anything that God directs him to do if his father will stop drinking. When the story opens Charlie's father is two years sober. By that time Charlie has a history of seeking out good deeds to do because he is afraid his father will start drinking again if Charlie doesn't recognize and perform the deed that God wants him to do. Charlie's caretaking nature, activated by his father's alcoholism and the bargaining prayer, develops his motivation for his deeds throughout the novel. Charlie's love of his father, friends, and Radar ennobles his character and makes his motivation for going on his quest to be convincing to the reader.

I liked the book well enough to want to see how it compared with King's earlier forays into fantasy. I reread *The Talisman* with Peter Straub (1984), *The Eyes of the Dragon* (1987), and *The Black House* with Peter Straub (2001),

all of which I read when they first came out. *Fairy Tale* fares well when compared to the other three books. In *The Talisman* twelve-year-old Jack Sawyer regularly flips into the alternate fairy world that he calls The Territories. His quest is to find a talisman to heal his mother, Lily Cavanaugh Sawyer, and her double in The Territories, Queen Laura DeLoessian, of cancer. There are similarities between the fairylands of the two novels, but *The Talisman* and *Fairy Tale* have different feels to them. Part of the difference could be because *The Talisman* and *The Black House* were co-authored with Peter Straub. In King's novels it is common for villains and their mouth pieces to spew ugly and vulgar insults at the hero; this occurs repeatedly in *The Talisman* and *The Black House* but does not occur in *Fairy Tale* at all. King's *The Eyes of the Dragon* was written for and dedicated to his then thirteen-year-old daughter Naomi. It is clean of any ugly insults or vulgar language. The sequel to *The Talisman*, *The Black House*, gives the story of Jack Sawyer as an adult, a retired homicide detective who is tracking down a serial killer. It shares the alternate world and the same language as its predecessor. Personally, I have reread *The Talisman* about four times over the years because I like it so much.

I was not very impressed with *The Eyes of the Dragon* when it was published, but I really appreciated and enjoyed it during my recent rereading of the book. Likewise, I didn't enjoy *The Black House* either, the first time I read it. I only reread it because it was the sequel to *The Talisman*. I enjoyed it more the second time, but it will never be one of my favorite books. The main thing it shares with *The Talisman* is The Territories, to which our hero and the villains flip to throughout the story. I found *The Black House*, despite the magic and The Territories, to be more of a police thriller than a fantasy novel because the majority of the story takes place in our ordinary world. With all of this said, I found *Fairy Tale* to



compare well with King's earlier fantasy novels. In time I might find that I like it as much as I do *The Talisman*. Also, I expect to be re-reading *The Eyes of the Dragon* for pleasure alone in the future.

I'm not suggesting that *Fairy Tale* has the depth of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Ursula K. Le Guin, and others. I can say that King successfully engages the traditions of fairy tale stories and fantasy literature in this piece of popular literature for the general reading public. Don't read it expecting to learn anything new about fairy tales. The novel is the product of a very successful popular writer and can be enjoyed on those terms.

In conclusion, I began this review by saying *Fairy Tale* is a worthy book. By that I mean it is a well-written, moving story about a likeable and thoughtful hero who puts himself at risk to help a friend, be loyal to his father, heal his dog, and to protect the people of Empris and ultimately our world. I recommend *Fairy Tale* to readers of all ages. The book will fit well in all public and high school libraries. My warning to librarians who serve younger readers is that the f-word is used often by every character in the book, but the ugly insults, mentioned earlier and found in King's other books, are absent. Overall, it is a conventionally clean book. Finally, I recommend *Fairy Tale* to practically anyone for pleasure reading. My last words are that the story might inspire readers to rescue a dog from the animal shelter. Fortunately, we have a German Shepherd in our household. It is easy throughout the reading of *Fairy Tale* for me to believe the lengths Charlie would go for the love of his dog Radar.