

Turkey embarks on cultural mission to preserve its fairy tales

Level: Advanced

1 Warmer

Write the titles of as many fairy tales as you can. Look up the titles in English if you don't know them.

English title	Title in my language

2 Key words

a. Match the words in the box to the definitions below. Then find them in the article to read them in context.

curse deceit enchanted erode fate heritage
intimidated maiden motif sultan villain wonder

1. use magic powers to make bad things happen to someone _____
2. a girl or young woman who is not married _____
3. a leader, similar to a king, in some Muslim countries _____
4. an idea, subject or story pattern that is frequently repeated in a piece of literature _____
5. gradually reduce the strength or importance of something _____
6. the art, buildings, traditions and beliefs that a society considers important to its history and culture _____
7. affected by special magic powers _____
8. the main bad character in a story, play, film, etc. _____
9. the things that happen to someone, especially unpleasant things _____
10. admire something and feel surprised by how beautiful or unusual it is _____
11. be made to feel nervous or frightened of someone or something _____
12. dishonest behaviour that is intended to trick someone _____

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Level: Advanced

b. Use some of the key words from 2a to complete these sentences.

1. It's hard not to _____ at the miracle of the first spring flowers appearing through the snow.
2. The whole relationship was based on lies and _____.
3. He's just like the _____ from a James Bond film.
4. The good witch lived in a small house in the middle of a/an _____ forest.
5. The mine collapsed and the poor miners suffered a terrible _____.
6. The historic building is as much part of our _____ as the paintings.

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Level: Advanced

'Teaching us wonder': Turkey embarks on cultural mission to preserve its fairy tales

Mammoth task to collate magical folklore of Anatolian plateau involves thousands of stories

Bethan McKernan

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- 1 Once upon a time, in the old, old days, when the mouse was a barber and the donkey ran errands and the tortoise baked bread, there was a great mountain called Kaf Dağı on the border of the spirit realm, from which many of the fairy tales and myths of the Middle East sprang forth.
- 2 Today, Kaf Dağı is thought to be somewhere in the Caucasus mountain range that separates the Black Sea from the Caspian. In this magical place – also known as *Jabal Qaf* in Arabic and *Kuh-e Qaf* in Persian – princes are cursed by witches, who turn them into stags; beautiful maidens are birthed from oranges; and sultans, courtiers, slaves and farmers alike are at the mercy of the *peri* (fairies) and *ifrit* (demons) that populate the Turkish fairyland.
- 3 The oral folktales of the Anatolian plateau are a remarkable blend of storytelling motifs and traditions, drawing on the *Arabian Nights* and Brothers Grimm, as well as Kurdish, Persian, Slavonic, Jewish and Romanian influences. Dr Ignác Kúnos, a Hungarian Turkologist who was one of the first academics to collect and write some of them down in the 1880s, compared the treasures of Turkish folklore to “precious stones lying neglected waiting for someone to gather them in.”
- 4 He worried that the steady creep of modernization – particularly the railway – would erode Anatolia’s cultural heritage. Happily, more than a century later, the oral storytelling tradition has survived, and a mammoth academic project called Masal is collecting and indexing a goal of 10,000 stories to preserve for future generations.
- 5 Members of the public and academics from university literature departments around the country can submit a fairy tale to Masal’s online portal, where it is then examined by three rounds of researchers and language editors. The project is funded by the Atatürk Cultural Centre in what is the first undertaking of its kind in Turkey.
- 6 The stories are indexed according to which of seven regions they are from and which type of stories they are: animal tales, magical or extraordinary tales, realistic tales and humorous tales. Zincirlemeli tales follow a strict formula, almost like a poem, in which characters and events at the beginning and end form mirror images.
- 7 There are often several different variants of one story, requiring painstaking cross-referencing to figure out how a tale can differ over time from one region to another: there are 20 different versions of *Tin Tin Kabacık*, about two little girls abandoned by their father, in the province of Muğla alone. Many stories and poems over the years have morphed into Turkish from original Kurdish, Laz, Armenian and Circassian versions.
- 8 If a submitted tale is approved, it becomes part of Masal’s online database, which will eventually be available to the public. More than 3,300 tales have been collected from 77 different areas to date, and the project’s directors hope the corpus will be completed by February, 2022.
- 9 Motifs such as magic carpets, animals and birds gifted with speech and enchanted mirrors, apples and pomegranates echo throughout the tales. Characters who brave the dragons and giants of Kaf Dağı or survive a trek across the desert are rewarded with marriage proposals in beautiful gardens, and the phoenix-like *Zumrud Anka*, or Simurgh bird, is always on hand to help a hero out of a tight spot.
- 10 The tales can be ugly, too. Black or Moorish servants, Jews and elderly witches almost always take the part of the villain; pashas (important men) have their innocent wives stoned to death and enemies ripped apart by wild horses; a sparrow comes to tell a young woman that death is her *kismet* (fate).
- 11 Turkish fairy tales also took on an important political dimension during the early days of the republic, when modern Turkey’s founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, attempted to force what was left of the Ottoman Empire into the modern world. Folk culture was rejected as backwards, and Turkish scholars who pioneered the study of folktales, became a target of Turkish nationalists in the 1940s for highlighting the country’s ethnic diversity in his work.

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Level: Advanced

- 12 “In folk tales, the heroes are mostly outsiders who suffer the violence of powerful autocrats; for politicians, their defiant tone is dangerous,” said author Kaya Genç.
- 13 Dr Mehmet Naci Önal, a lecturer at Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University’s department of Turkish language and literature, who serves as one of Masal’s researchers, hopes that academics, writers and artists will be able to draw on the project’s database of stories for generations to come.
- 14 “Fairy tales teach us to wonder, to use reason, to be patient, to dream, to overcome obstacles, not to be intimidated, to struggle, to be good people, to fight against evil, to tell the truth, to detect lies and deceit, to resist, and to listen. These values are universal human values: times change, people don’t.”

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Level: Advanced

3 Comprehension check

a. Find the information in the text.

1. Which part of the world do Turkish fairy tales generally come from?
2. Where are the fairy tales being collected, how and by whom?
3. How are the tales categorized?
4. Who will have access to this database when it is completed?

b. Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to the article?

1. Fairy tales are written exclusively for children. T / F
2. Fairy tales are an important part of a country's culture. T / F
3. Traditionally, fairy tales have been passed on by word of mouth. T / F
4. Fairy tales always include at least one fairy. T / F
5. Fairy tales can be scary and violent. T / F
6. Fairy tales give us hope that good will triumph over evil. T / F

4 Using key language

a. Match the beginnings and endings of these phrases. Then find and underline them in the article.

- | | |
|-------------|-------------------|
| 1. run | a. hand |
| 2. spring | b. obstacles |
| 3. at the | c. spot |
| 4. draw | d. strict formula |
| 5. follow a | e. errands |
| 6. gifted | f. forth |
| 7. on | g. mercy of |
| 8. a tight | h. with |
| 9. overcome | i. on |

b. Talk about what the phrases mean. Look up the meanings of any you do not know.

c. Use the phrases in sentences of your own. Which is the most useful expression for you?

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5 Discussion

- Referring back to your answers to task 1, talk about where you first encountered the fairy tales that you named. Did you read them yourself, were they read to you or were they presented to you in a different format?
- Many fairy tales have had their violent elements removed before being turned into animated films for children. Can you think of any examples where this has happened, and do you think it is necessary to do this?
- Do you have any favourite characters from fairy tales? If so, talk about who these are.

6 In your own words

As in the very first words of the article, most fairy tales in English start with the words *Once upon a time*. If the story has a happy ending, it often ends with the words *and they all lived happily ever after*.

Think of a fairy tale from your culture or country, or one you remember from your childhood, or one that impressed you and sticks in your mind.

- a. Summarize the fairy tale in note form.
- b. Use your notes to retell your fairy tale. Begin with the words *Once upon a time*.