

QUESTIONS FOR BOOK CLUBS

- 1.) In “The Gold in the Straw,” instead of guessing Rumpelstiltskin’s name, the maiden guesses her own and says, “the dwarf winks with your eye, smiles with your lips.” What do you think of this alternative ending? Did Rumpelstiltskin exist? What do you think he represented to the maiden?
- 2.) “Untruths About the Desirability of Wolves” shows a more grown up Little Red Riding Hood. Why do you think she defends herself against the “sexy wolf” statements and then becomes a wolf hunter?
- 3.) In the modern adaptations of “The Little Mermaid,” she temporarily gives up her voice for love, while in both the original fairytale by Hans Christian Anderson and “Lure,” she permanently gives up her life. Why do you think so many modern adaptations of fairytales mask the darker side of the original story? Do you think the original or adapted versions are more effective?

4.) Who do you imagine “For Taylor, On the Occasion of Her Fourteenth Birthday with Love” to be written for? What was your favorite piece of advice?

5.) Both “Bones in the Branches” and “A Letter Concerning Shoes” depict a man of so-called lower social status seeking a relationship with a princess out of his league. What do the soldier and the cobbler have in common? What are their differences? What do these two stories say about love and the human condition?

6.) In many stories like “The Long Con” and “The Peril of Stories,” magical creatures, such as the witch and Rumpelstiltskin, exchange something for a child. Why do you think these “villains” want a human baby so badly?

*Megan Engelhardt and Amanda C. Davis reveal
how storytelling can be a family affair.*

AUTHORS SPOTLIGHT & INTERVIEW

by Annie Locke

Many people remember growing up playing make-believe with their siblings, yet Megan Engelhardt and Amanda C. Davis recall their playtime taking a more colorful approach. These two sisters' childhood games somehow organically formed into a structured narrative full of protagonists and conflict. They played Tom and Huck, explorers, dinosaurs, and when they ran out of money in Monopoly, the "Rug Fairy" would replenish their cash. "If we played house, it was weird house," says Davis.

From a young age, they shared a love for storytelling—two budding authors waiting to happen. They started writing early in their childhood. Davis can find samples of her fiction from the first and second grade, and Engelhardt started writing early as well but really picked up her passion for writing in college.

According to Davis, Engelhardt was her first reader. "She was a captive audience," says Davis, "so a lot of my early fiction was *for* her in some sense, and it sort of still is . . . She's been my first, best reader forever."

Although both have developed satisfying careers as authors, *Wolves and Witches* is their first conjoined project. They did appear in three previous anthologies together, but this short story collection marks their first co-authored full-length work.

As they decided to grant their long-time wish to publish together, fairytales seemed an obvious choice. Both authors loved fairytales and wrote many on their own before starting this project. In fact, many of the *Wolves and Witches* stories were written before Engelhardt and Davis first considered the idea of a short story collection. Their inspiration stemmed from their already growing independent pools of classic fairytales reimagined.

“I think we’ve always had it in our heads that we ‘should’ do something together, but never really had it figured out what would work,” says Engelhardt. “Our styles are very similar, but we do have some differences that don’t always mesh together . . . we looked around and thought ‘Huh, we both have a lot of fairy tale stories! Maybe we should do something with that!’”

The result was *Wolves and Witches*, a collection of short stories and poems that allows us to see our favorite fairytales from different angles. Some stories make us unexpectedly chuckle. Others leave haunting images in our minds long after we put the book down. And many of the stories cultivate the same heartwarming nostalgia present in the original fairytales we know so well. Whether the stories reveal a sassy Little Red Riding Hood or a reluctant Prince Charming, they offer an enjoyable, alternative view to these classic tales.

Inevitably, every reader has a collection of questions for the authors that created this memorable world. Megan Engelhardt and Amanda C. Davis agreed to answer just a few . . .

Sit Down with Megan Engelhardt

How did you become interested in fairy tales and horror fiction?

I'm not much into horror stuff, actually—that's Amanda's area! But there is an inherent horrific quality to fairy tales, isn't there, and I do really love—and have always loved!—fairytales. In elementary school I checked out every single fairy tale and folklore related book in the school library. One of my proudest moments in fourth grade, actually, was playing The Hog Man in a very elementary version of the tale of the volcano goddess Pele from Hawaii. I'm not sure how much it had in common with the actual folktale, but I got to wear a cape and act villainous so that was pretty cool.

What's your favorite classic fairy tale and why? What is your favorite story in *Wolves and Witches* and why?

Oof, it's hard to choose a favorite. Currently I like Rumpelstiltskin a lot, but I've always been a fan of Bearskin, too. I like tales with clever people! From *Wolves and Witches*, I'm most proud of "Diamond and Toad," I would really love to see it performed! And Amanda's "The Instructions" is just so simple and succinct and then that last line hits you with a snap. Excellent.

Your two writing styles complement each other seamlessly. Do you think your sister has influenced your style over the years? In what ways do you think you are different?

We grew up on the same books, movies, music, stories, so we're bound to have a lot of the same influences floating around. And since we've been bouncing ideas off of each other for years, we've had a long time to learn how the other works! We definitely have some differences, though. For one, Amanda is better than I am! I'm also less methodical and thoughtful about things; I'm definitely more of a "shoot from the hip" writer.

What is the biggest challenge in reworking fairy tales?

Everyone knows the ending! And everyone has their favorite version. You're going up against not only what the reader expects from the tale, but also what you yourself have internalized. Could I give Cinderella shoes that weren't made of glass? Maybe, but it would feel really weird.

In "Bones in the Branches" and "A Letter Concerning Shoes," you both chose to rework the tale of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" from new perspectives. What made you want to write from the cobbler's point of view? I was particularly intrigued by the choice of the cobbler as he's a character who isn't "on stage" in most versions of this tale. What sparked your interest in making him the lovelorn character he became?

There are two characters that are sort of invisible major players in the tale of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses"—the witch and the cobbler. They both play really important roles in the story, but you hear almost nothing about them. Out of the two the witch at least gets a speaking role sometimes in her dealings with the soldier, but no one ever talks about where all those shoes came from. SOMEONE is making them, right? I started wondering

what that person thought about the whole weird thing going on up at the castle and realized pretty quickly that they had to have some sort of personal interest. I'm a sucker for unrequited love, so that seemed an obvious direction to take things.

What other types of writing can we expect from you in the future? Will you collaborate with your sister again?

My short stories have somehow turned into novellas lately, so I've got a few longer-form projects in the works. I've got another collaborative work, a series of fantasy novels, which is shaping up nicely as well. I'd love to work with Amanda again on a project, although currently the only thing we're working on is our informal tag-team comedy show that happens when we chat with each other on Twitter.

Whom did you write "For Taylor, On the Occasion of Her Fourteenth Birthday with Love" for? Who is Taylor and why did you want to give her this advice?

Taylor was a young girl in the church youth group I helped lead several years ago. For her fourteenth birthday, her mom reached out to several women who were involved in Taylor's life and asked us to write letters about growing up, being a woman, anything like that. Taylor and I shared a love of reading and fairytales in particular, so I felt the best way to share my advice for her was something full of literary references. A lot of the advice in the poem is stuff I wish someone had told me when I was her age!

In “The Long Con,” what did you hope to reveal about Rumpelstiltskin by offering a new perspective of the original fairy tale?

Rumpelstiltskin is a smooth dude. He’s clearly run this sort of scam before, so it always bothered me that he so easily gives up his name. He knows the princess has her men scouring the countryside, so why in the world would he just shout out his name in the woods one night when someone was bound to hear him? The story was my way of trying to reconcile my image of Rumpelstiltskin—the accomplished conman—with that out-of-character move.

A Conversation with Amanda C. Davis

How did you become interested in fairy tales and horror fiction?

Typical childhood fascination with the macabre?

What’s your favorite classic fairy tale and why? What is your favorite story in *Wolves and Witches* and why?

I always go for Molly Whuppie as my favorite, since it’s one of those cleverness-wins-the-day types. In *Wolves and Witches*, “Untruths About the Desirability of Wolves” just delights me. My sister is awesome.

Your two writing styles complement each other seamlessly. Do you think your sister has influenced your style over the years? In what ways do you think you are different?

Unquestionably she's influenced my style . . . I think our styles mesh so well because we both work toward being clever, occasionally lyrical, always easy on the tongue. Our biggest differences are probably viewpoint and preferred subject matter. We're both writing the stories only we can write, and there's no way we could be writing each other's, if that makes sense.

What is the biggest challenge in reworking fairy tales?

For me, it's finding an angle that interests me and hasn't been done a dozen times. There are a lot of fairy-tale retellings out there.

In "Bones in the Branches" and "A Letter Concerning Shoes," you both chose to rework the tale of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses." What influenced your retelling?

I wanted to give the princesses more agency. Maybe they're not enchanted at all, they're doing all the enchanting themselves. They built themselves an underground kingdom, and they're not interested in being spied on. I did a similar thing in my novelette "The Lair of the Twelve Princesses," by the way.

What other types of writing can we expect from you in the future? Will you collaborate with your sister?

I have stories coming out in *Cemetery Dance*, *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination*, *Year's Best Weird Fiction Vol 2*, and several others. I don't see myself leaving the short fiction and poetry circuit; it's just too fun. I'm constantly working on a novel or three. I wouldn't be surprised if the two of us came up with

another joint project one of these days. Not even necessarily a writing project. We're hilarious if you put us in the same room together.

In "The Gold in the Straw," what gave you the idea to make the maiden the magical dwarf herself?

I wish I could remember! I usually approach a fairy-tale retelling by breaking it down into the available elements and sifting through them, so if I had to guess, it came after noticing that the miller's daughter was, two out of three times, giving up her jewelry: trading gold for gold. Once you've got transmutation magic available, the dwarf isn't really necessary!

I noticed in your stories you often use a comedic tone. How do you find comedy to be a useful tool for reimagining fairy tales? What fairy tale motifs are you poking fun at in "Questing for Princesses"?

I'm not poking fun at any of them! I'm playing them straight! All the stories I reference (and I got a big kick out of cramming them in, let me tell you) are totally legitimate in the story's universe. They're going to come true for somebody, just not Harold. They whiz right over his head because they don't suit him. He gets the kind of fairy tale that suits him. Which is similar to how it works in real life.

Comedy amuses me, which is my primary writing goal, but it's specifically useful for approaching fairy tales because you have these ridiculous elements coming out of the woodwork. You can play up how terrible they'd be in real life or you can step back and laugh. I like doing both.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Amanda C. Davis is a combustion engineer who loves baking, gardening, and low-budget horror films. Her short fiction has appeared in *Shock Totem*, *Orson Scott Card's InterGalactic Medicine Show*, and others. You can follow her on Twitter @davisac1 or read more of her work at amandacdavis.com.

Megan Engelhardt is a lapsed librarian who lives in a crooked little house in northeast Ohio. She loves shows about Bigfoot. Her work has appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Drabblecast*, and others. You can follow her on Twitter @MadMerryMeg or visit her website at megengelhardt.com.