

3.10 Forest of a Thousand Lanterns by Julie C. Dao - Discussion and Review

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[fade in: plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano, and twinkly triangle]

Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome back to The Community Library: a podcast, book club, and discussion space. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

[fade out: theme music]

Angourie [host]

This month, I embarked on a journey of analysing and comparing fairy tales with their Disney adaptations. And boy, it was a wild ride. Each week I just immersed myself in the world of a different fairy tale. And I researched, and annotated, and planned, and wrote, and recorded, and finally edit content all about a Disney Princess. And it was quite intense, actually, to just live in the headspace of a Disney princess or fairy tale heroine each week. It felt like everything that happened in that particular week could be related back to the fairy tale I was studying. I really couldn't escape it, like I even began to dream about fairy tales. So, it was lots of fun, but definitely one of the most intense research projects I've done for the podcast. So, I think I'm looking forward to having a little break from Princesses. But let me know if you'd like me to do it again, because there are plenty of Disney Princesses and fairy tales that I haven't yet covered!

Aside from living in a Disney world this month, August has been, ah, interesting. At the beginning of this month, Melbourne, which is where I live, entered stage 4 lockdown, which is the most severe restrictions since the pandemic begun. We're very fortunate in my household, but of course, you know, we all have our good days and bad days. So, we're trying to keep spirits up by baking lots and watching *The Bachelor*. Last week my mum made Sri Lankan Love Cake, which is a very sweet cake with lots of eggs and nuts and honey, so we've been devouring that. I also made marmalade biscuits, but I accidentally stuffed them with too much marmalade so they're very thick with two "c"s and juicy. Paddington Bear would be proud. Something that happened towards the end of August is that *Midnight Sun* by Stephenie Meyer was released. I didn't buy it, but my friend Maija who has been a guest on this podcast before, has lent me her copy. So, I'm reading that, and [sigh] look, it's simultaneously bringing me so much pain and so much joy.

And so here we come to the end of August, and to the end of my fairy tale journey. Our book club pick for this month was *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns* by Julie C. Dao. It's an East Asian fantasy reimagining of the Evil Queen's origin story from *Snow White*. Here's what Goodreads says:

[fade in: ominous and delicate twinkly piano music]

“Eighteen-year-old Xifeng is beautiful. The stars say she is destined for greatness, that she is meant to be Empress of Feng Lu. But only if she embraces the darkness within her. Growing up as a peasant in a forgotten village on the edge of the map, Xifeng longs to fulfill the destiny promised to her by her cruel aunt, the witch Guma, who has read the cards and seen glimmers of Xifeng’s magical future. But is the price of the throne too high? Because in order to achieve greatness, she must spurn the young man who loves her and exploit the callous magic that runs through her veins – sorcery fueled by eating the hearts of the recently killed. For the god who has sent her on this journey will not be satisfied until his power is absolute.”

[fade out: twinkly piano music]

So, I wanted to choose this book because it was a fairy tale retelling, but also because it focused on the Evil Queen’s perspective. If you listened to the episode on *Snow White*, you will know that the Evil Queen is infinitely more interesting to me than Snow White herself. In fact, the same can be said for most of the female villains in fairy tales. But reading this book was a really interesting experience for me, because I’m not very well-read in the genre of YA high fantasy. Most of the YA fantasy I read is urban fantasy, like *Harry Potter*, *Twilight* or *Percy Jackson*. These series are all set partially in the real world. But *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns* is not set in our world, it’s set on the magical continent of Feng Lu, where the five Dragon Lords rule over their respective Kingdoms. And this is where I want to start the discussion, with talking about the world.

So *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns* places the fairy tale of *Snow White* in a completely new context. No more pseudo-medieval dresses and Germanic-sounding names. No, this new world is inspired by East Asian culture and folklore. And the world that Dao creates is lush and immersive, rich with dark magic and dangerous beauty. The title of the book, *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns*, is a reference to a story that’s told *within* the story of the book, and you know I love that. So it’s the title of a fairy tale that the Empress of Feng Lu tells our protagonist about secret lovers who plan to meet in the forest at night. I loved this element because, not only do I love a story within a story, but it also harks back to the origins of the *Snow White* story and how it’s been passed down for generations. I like how it’s a reference to the methodology and history of story-telling and fairy tales, and because of that, I think this book has a real fairy-tale-like quality about it. It almost kind of has that self-awareness that I was talking about last episode with Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Snow Queen*. You know, that idea of creating a new fairy tale within the context of existing fairy tales. I think the tone of the story also really matched the tone of those original tales: it was a beautiful and vivid world, but also had a deep undercurrent of darkness and danger.

Speaking of darkness and danger, let’s talk about our protagonist and driving force of this novel: Xifeng. I asked you on Instagram what you wanted me to talk about in my discussion of this book, and everyone mentioned Xifeng the anti-heroine. As I mentioned before, this fairy tale is kind of skewed because it’s a villain’s origin story. So, we’re rooting for a person who will eventually turn out to be the baddie – and this is something we know going in. So, if we know this about the story, if we know how it’s going to end, why do we care? I think Dao crafted this in a really clever way. Xifeng’s story actually starts out like the story of *Snow White*. She is an orphan child in the care of her abusive aunt, and their family is poor, and Xifeng is made to do most of the housework. And,

again, similarly to Snow White, all she's really got going for her is her incredible beauty. Well, and her cunning ambition, but Snow doesn't have that. So, at the beginning of the novel, we're sympathetic towards Xifeng – but not only because she is abused, but also because she is, at least at the beginning, choosing the light. She doesn't begin as the Evil Queen. Rather, she begins her story as a young girl who has this kind of seed of darkness inside her. And this evil being is characterised as a snake. So all throughout our story, Xifeng is presented with a choice: to be kind and loving and open-hearted, or to succumb to the darkness within and serve the snake. And so, at the beginning of the story, we're rooting for her – at least I was – to choose the light. And that makes it all the more intriguing and then upsetting when ignoring the snake becomes harder and harder for her, and she eventually gives in.

In a lot of ways, her character arc reminded me of Dorian Gray from Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In this book, Dorian Gray has a magic portrait that ages for him, while he remains ever youthful. And he becomes consumed with beauty and pride, and becomes more and more fearful that someone should discover his secret. We watch him descend into a twisted, tortured existence, and before he can stop it – he's in too deep. Xifeng has a very similar story, and I liked how subtle and gradual it was, like in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It happens through a series of little decisions, and slowly she becomes more ruthless and unforgiving. So she crosses the line before she even realises it, and when she turns back one last time, she knows it's too late. I find this type of story really interesting, because we know how it's going to end. Like *Romeo and Juliet*, it's an epic tragedy that you can't prevent – you just have to watch it all descend into chaos. And so even though we go into it knowing Xifeng will become the villain, I think the novel pushes us to understand why she becomes the villain. Not to necessarily to humanise her, or make her sympathetic – because she does some pretty terrible things – but to give her some context and understanding, and enrich the story of *Snow White* that we thought we knew so well.

A big theme of the original tale and the Disney adaptation is beauty, and this is something we see echoed in *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns*, as well. But this time it's not about being gracious in your beauty or insecure in your beauty, oh no. For Xifeng, beauty is power. The world of Feng Lu has similarities with ancient Chinese Dynasties. We've got Emperors and Empresses and concubines. And with that kind of sixteenth century, seventeenth century world, it comes a layer of knowledge that, if a woman is not born into wealth or royalty, her beauty is one of the only ways she can wield power. Xifeng becomes obsessed with preserving her beauty, because she knows it is her survival. She's clever and she's cunning, and this helps her along her journey, but she knows she is able to perform her wily tricks and manipulation successfully because she is beautiful. I love this element because we finally see a different side to the Evil Queen's obsession with beauty. In this story, it's not necessarily narcissism, but rather a means of survival.

Another symbol that crosses over from the original tale to *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns* is the heart. In Dao's novel, Xifeng eats the hearts of animals to heal her wounds and return to her state of unmarked beauty. This harks back to the original Grimms' fairy tale in which the Evil Queen eats Snow White's lungs and liver, but the symbol of the heart was actually introduced by Disney's animated film. I find this really interesting, because it shows that Disney's film has influenced our knowledge of *Snow White* just as much as the original fairy tale, if not even more so. The symbol of the heart is the one we remember – not the lungs and the liver. This change in the Disney movie isn't one I spoke about in my initial episode on *Snow White*, but I think it's very important because it plays into the theme of love and emotion. The heart is not only a symbol of life, but also love, and

this ties into Disney's whole thing about true love's kiss. So, Xifeng eating the hearts of animals is a symbol of her rejection of love and goodness.

Of course we also have a version of the magic mirror. In *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns*, it's a waterfall in a cave that runs down in a sleek sheet so that it provides a reflection. Though the mirror doesn't actually talk to Xifeng – and she doesn't talk to it – the snake inside her does, and tells her she is quote-unquote “*fairest*”. I really liked the way this classic iconography was integrated into the novel. It felt really organic, not like the author was following a formula for the sake of making it a *Snow White* retelling. But I also loved how it referenced elements of both the original Grimms' tale and the Disney adaptation, while also bringing in elements of East Asian folklore and symbols. And it kind of made the story a melting pot of histories and story-telling.

Unfortunately, there were a few things I didn't like about the book. I thought the pacing was a bit off – everything happened really quickly for me. And I thought the ending was rushed. There was a big time jump at the end of the novel – a two year time-jump, in fact. And this wasn't for a little, like, “where are they now?”-type epilogue, but rather to get us to the next dramatic point in the story. And this just felt very misplaced and like it wrapped up way too quickly. Another criticism I have, though is that I thought Xifeng got it all too easy. Every plan she made went the way she wanted it to. It wasn't very difficult at all for her to get into the palace and set her plans in motion. I wanted to see more of a struggle, I really wanted to see her fight. Another issue I had was that some of the characters felt very unrealistic. Lady Sun especially, was under-developed and two-dimensional. I felt like I've read characters like her before, and she was just a bit predictable and uninteresting. At the start of the book, Xifeng has a relationship with a boy called Wei, and I also thought that relationship was under-developed. There was so little time to understand their relationship, and so I just didn't believe it. And I wasn't invested in the outcome of it, because there was practically no build up.

This novel felt like a puzzle piece in a much bigger story, which it is. It's the first book in a duology, which I didn't know when I chose it. I don't read many book series, but when I do, I like the individual books to also work as a stand-alone novel, and I don't know if *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns* really does that. But again I – you know, I could just be unused to reading series. Overall, I enjoyed this book. I gave it three out of five stars, I think it was a solid read.

[fade in and out: twinkly piano music sound bite to indicate a little break]

Even though *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns* didn't become my favourite book of the year, it was still a valuable reading experience, because it's an insight into how fairy tales can be retold in this day and age. Throughout this whole research project, I've been seeking to understand why these old stories still grasp us today, and why we keep retelling them and adapting them for modern audiences.

As I talked about in previous episodes in this fairy tale series, an element that plays into it is money. By repackaging something that people already know about, you're guaranteed an established audience. But I don't think easy money is the only reason we keep coming back to these stories. I think it's also about wanting to understand our past in a new way. To see how these stories have shaped us, for better or for worse. And if for worse – as is the case with many of these stories, unfortunately – then these new adaptations can subvert and deconstruct these tropes.

I think at the moment we're seeing a whole new wave of story-tellers who are doing just that. These writers are asking: what different characters and perspectives should we be seeking to understand? Who are the new heroes? As a bit of background reading for this project I read *A Song Below Water* by Bethany C. Morrow. This is an urban fantasy novel set in a world with magical beings such as sirens and gargoyles. In this novel, sirens are almost exclusively black women, and the way sirens are treated is used as an allegory to talk about racism and police brutality. So Bethany C. Morrow uses the framework of fairy tale tropes and mermaid lore to talk about current issues. So, by returning to these old tales from a modern context, we can extract tropes and story-lines that we understand, and apply them or subvert them to help us talk about concepts, and characters, and perspectives that have previously been ignored.

In doing this research project, I think my love of fairy tales has wavered a little. I don't think I ever truly understood how deep, and how far back, these harmful tropes run. But I think you can love something and be critical of it at the same time. And I've learnt that I shouldn't necessarily take things at face value, especially when it comes to stories with histories as complicated and convoluted as fairy tales. Because the danger with particular versions of these stories being so embedded in our literary canon, is that we begin to think we know all there is to know. And if we dismiss Cinderella as feeble while only knowing of Disney's 1950 version, or laud Ariel as a powerful heroine without knowing of her painful origins – then we rob ourselves of a deeper understanding of the meaning behind these fairy tales, and also story-telling as a whole.

I am a firm believer in going back to the past to help us understand the present. I love reading classics, I love watching old movies, I love reading original fairy tales. But in reading *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns* and *A Song Below Water* for this project, I've also come to learn the importance of looking to the future, as well. In order to shift the types of stories that make it into the literary canon, we need to shift our whole concept of story-telling. Our understanding of what makes a hero and what makes a villain needs to change. Our understanding of female goodness vs. male heroics needs to change. I think it's important to understand and know these fairy tale tropes, but so that we can subvert them and change them in order to create a more diverse and inclusive literary canon. A literary canon in which spinster women are the heroes, a canon in which characters are not just queer-coded but actually queer, a canon in which the Little Mermaid lives a happy and fulfilling life with a disability. Now that is a world I want to be a part of.

[fade in: plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano, and twinkly triangle]

Thank you very much for listening. If you liked my whole series on fairy tales and Disney Princesses, please give the podcast a star rating or review on iTunes, or you can tell your friends or share it online! Whatever you want, ah ... just, if you like it, share it! Yep, okay, self-promo! I love creating this kind of discussion content for you and I hope you enjoy listening. This Sunday you can look forward to a very special episode in which I interview author and astrophysicist, Lisa Harvey-Smith! It's gonna be a very exciting episode, and something a bit different. But until then, I hope you're all staying safe, reading good books, and singing along to Disney Princess soundtracks. Bye!

[fade out: theme music]

The Community Library – Angourie Rice

Angourie

–is quite important, because it plays –

[phone alarm goes off]

Angourie

Ooh, hello?