Spindle's End Short Guide

Spindle's End by Robin McKinley

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Contents

Overview

A retelling of the "Sleeping Beauty" tale, Spindle's End is Robin McKinley's fifth retelling of a fairy tale. (McKinley's Beauty 1978, and Rose Daughter 1997, both retell Madame Le Prince de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast," The Outlaws of Sherwood 1988, retells the legend of Robin Hood, and Deerskin 1993, retells Charles Perrault's "Donkeyskin"). As such, McKinley's Spindle's End demonstrates her increasing mastery over the art of retellings. Within the text, McKinley describes the literary and mythic function of fairy tales by referring to popular fairy tales as well as contemporary critical readings of those tales.

In the tale of "Sleeping Beauty," the king and queen invite fairy godmothers to bestow gifts to their long-awaited daughter.

But there is one more fairy, angered that she has not been asked to be a fairy godmother or invited to the celebration, who appears and curses the baby princess. The evil fairy declares that on the princess's birthday (sixteenth or twenty-first depending on the version), the princess will prick her finger on a spindle and die. The king and queen decree that all spindles should be banished, but inevitably the princess stumbles upon a spinning wheel on her birthday, pricks her finger on the spindle, and is plunged into a one hundred-year sleep. During those one hundred years, briars and roses grow up around the castle, keeping the sleeping princess inside and any potential rescuers outside. One hundred years later, on the anniversary of the princess' birthday, a handsome prince, inspired by stories of the beautiful sleeping princess, cuts through the briars with his sword, finds the princess, and kisses her awake. With her, the entire kingdom reawakens—the servants, the cooking fires, even the castle spiders. As can be expected from a fairy tale, the prince and princess marry and live happily ever after.

Spindle's End is a detailed retelling of "Sleeping Beauty" in that the characters are multi-dimensional, with the described experiences and individual personalities that readers have come to expect from a good novel. But McKinley is careful to assert that fairy tales, like magic spells, are complex, that they have lasting affects on our human development and on our world. In order to do justice to retelling her story and her ideas, Robin McKinley organizes her 351page novel into 5 books.

The king and queen are delighted to have produced a female heir (which, we are told, is highly unusual but auspicious). They decide to hold a name-day celebration to which 20 fairy godparents are invited—as well as one representative from each village, to be chosen by the drawing of straws.

And this is how we are introduced to Katriona. Katriona, a young woman from the Gig (one of the farthest and foggiest points from the royal city), and an apprenticing fairy to her Aunt, is the one to draw the single long straw. She travels to the princess name-day celebration by foot (it takes her fifty-one days), laden down with charms, and carrying only a few coins.

Although she travels lightly to the royal city, she returns with a much greater burden. While at the celebration, the evil fairy Pernicia dramatically appears and casts her spell for the princess' twenty-first birthday.

Without thinking, Katriona picks up the three-month old princess and soothes her by saying that she can have her gift: beast speech. The ability to speak to animals is the last remnant of Katriona's "baby magic," and all she has to offer the princess.

With a quick blessing from Sigil, the queen's own fairy, Katriona carries the princess home. She travels off the main road to avoid detection, and feeds the princess with the milk of helpful animal mothers who have heard of their plight and who understand their common enemy to be Pernicia.

So foxes, bears, dogs, otters, and others feed the princess; she is given both beast-speech and beast milk. Three months later, Katriona arrives exhausted and hungry at her doorstep. Together, Katriona and Aunt decide that the princess will be raised as a country girl and as a beloved cousin and niece to Katriona and Aunt. Because they must keep her safe, they call her simply Rosie. Rosie's full name, her royal blood, as well as her beast milk feedings, is kept a secret even from herself.

In book two of McKinley's Spindle's End, the reader begins to understand the significance of the novel's title. Shortly after Katriona and Rosie arrive at their village, a royal messenger arrives bearing the news that no spindle's end shall be wider than a three-month old baby's finger. Because of this, spindle ends become wide, rounded, and tapered off at one end. Spinners adjust their wheels and carved spindle ends, often with anthropomorphic faces or intricate designs, become a folk art—prized as family heirlooms and given as gifts. Katriona's friend, Barder the wheelwright, carves a grinning gargoyle for Katriona and Aunt.

But Rosie is not taught to spin. In an effort to conceal Rosie's gifts (among them, excellent spinning, fine embroidery, golden curls and teeth like pearls), Katriona and Aunt encourage Rosie's less dramatic and tell-tale abilities. McKinley is careful to point Spindle's End 385 out that: "aside from her hair, she was not pretty—all those fairy godmothers giving her lips like cherries and teeth like pearls and skin like silk and they forgot to make her pretty... and she was intelligent." Still, Katriona and Aunt fear that Pernicia will find Rosie. So when Rosie cuts her hair and insists on wearing trousers, when she expresses disinclination to the domestic and traditionally feminine gifts bestowed on her name-day, Katriona and Aunt do not argue.

Every once in a while, though, Katriona cannot help but lose her temper over the fairy gifts given to the princess: One and twenty of the most powerful and important fairies in the country! They could have made her invulnerable to curses!

They could have made her invisible to anyone who wished her harm! They could have —they could—and they gave her golden hair!

Katriona's argument, that Rosie's gifts of domestic femininity and good looks are petty and insignificant when compared to gifts that could protect her, is not lost on the reader. Culturally, that Rosie is encouraged as a tomboy is not terribly problematic.

Katriona and Aunt love Rosie like one of their own, and because Rosie can talk to animals, the villagers accept that she, like her family, will be a fairy. Rosie belongs.

Rosie becomes accustomed to hanging around the forge with Narl, the village smith. Aside from a few close calls (Katriona's accidental dream-conversation with the queen in which she tells her that the princess is safe, "as safe as ordinariness can make her," and Peony's attempt to teach Rosie to embroider), Rosie is brought up as a common—if slightly uncommon—country girl.

By the end of book two, Rosie is a young woman old enough to be apprenticed to Narl as a horse-leech, old enough to be a bridesmaid at Katriona and Barder's wedding. Along with Katriona, Barder, Aunt, and several animal friends (Flinx the cat and Fiend the cow among them), Rosie moves into the wheelwright's house just across from the smithy and the wainwright in the village square.

In book three of Spindle's End, Rosie makes her first significant friendship outside of her family, her too-numerous-to-mention animal friends, and Narl. Initially, Rosie is inclined to dislike the niece of the wainwright and her neighbor, Peony—perhaps because Peony is so many things that Rosie is not: [Peony] could sew, cook, and clean; she wrote a good clear hand and did sums accurately. She could carry a tune, she could dance, and play upon what variety of musical instruments the village offered.

She was also beautiful. (She had long curling golden eyelashes, although not so long as Rosie's.) It was all too much. Rosie had thought so for years, and avoided her.

While Rosie's traditionally boyish ways have been encouraged, Peony is praised for being traditionally (domestically) feminine.

Despite her reservations, however, Rosie and Peony develop an immediate and intimate friendship. Not only do they find a great friendship in each other, but both Rosie and Peony find romantic love. In watching Peony fall in love with Rowland, Narl's new apprentice, Rosie discovers that she is in love with Narl.

The end of book three provides two turning points in the narrative, one in the point of view of the novel, and the other in the plot. While the narrator of Spindle's End is omniscient, books one and two primarily develop Katriona's point of view, as well as her descriptions of and insights into Rosie's character. In book three, the narrator begins to develop Rosie's character in her own words and thoughts. The age of the main protagonist is partly why Spindle's End is categorized as young adult literature. Young adulthood marks the time in which we 386 Spindle's End grow into our "innate greatness"—and it is the age in which McKinley, a young adult author, is most interested. Thus, Rosie becomes the primary character and it is through her that we continue to interpret the action of the novel. The turning point of the plot happens at the end of book three, when Ikor, a royal fairy messenger, completes his quest to find Rosie

and announces—to her confounded amazement—that she is the princess, that her twenty-first birthday is approaching, and that it is time for her whereabouts and well-being to be made public. In an attempt to ward off Pernicia's curse, a large celebration is planned with each character doing what must be done to protect the princess and the kingdom with love, cheer and optimism. The reader is told that love is the best defense against evil.

Because Rosie is brave, and because she understands that she must stand up to her fate, she resigns herself to the project. Rather than losing time by questioning and resisting—and because, in truth, there is no time to lose—Rosie accepts her identity, her fate, and her responsibility.

As is appropriate in literature for young adults, book three of Spindle's End is about transitions and turning points; and book four is about definition, redefinition, and identity. In book four it becomes clear to everyone involved that Rosie is not the sort of princess that a public craves. Indeed, she is the first to admit that she is not princess material—and that she does not want to be.

Ikor announces that Peony is the princess, and the princess. Peony and her lady-inwaiting Rosie, are removed to Woodwold, the local aristocratic seat to prepare for the princess's twenty-first birthday.

The public is thrilled. It is completely believable to them that Peony is the princess. Even better, the discovery of Peony as the princess promises a fairy-tale ending.

Along with the subjects of the realm, the readers of Spindle's End learn that Rowland is really the Heir-prince of Erlion and that he has sworn to defend and to marry the unfortunately cursed princess. How wonderful that the beautiful princess should be discovered and that it should happen that she and Rowland have already fallen in love.

Despite the shocking news, Rosie's upbringing gives her the strong sense of self and the emotional equipment necessary to battle an evil curse; Peony's sense of friendship and of fealty give her the strength she needs to play a princess (and to risk her own life for her best friend and for the good of the kingdom). Book four of Spindle's End does much to suggest that nobility—especially in terms of "innate greatness"—is a matter of inherent character, not birth or gender. Robin McKinley proves her own adage: we all possess inherent nobility. Like Rosie and like Rowland, we really are secret princesses and princes.

McKinley recalls and revises the fairy tale—engaging what is to be celebrated in it as well as what is in need of contemporary adaptation. Having described the long, three-month wait at Woodwold, the complications and inconveniences of being bound together by a charm, and the endless preparations for the princess's twenty-first birthday celebration, and having asserted that nobility is a matter of character and not only a matter of birth, Robin McKinley is quick to point out the fallibility of fairy tale princesses and our attendant expectations of femininity: The ladies-in-waiting had rushed on to Woodwold from wherever they lived as soon as their fortunate preferment

had been made known to them. Most of them would have cultivated Rosie as the known best friend of the princess, except that Rosie was half afraid of them, partly because they wore all their flounces and under-petticoats so easily, and partly because she couldn't manage to get their names straight: they seemed all to be called things like Claralinda and Dulcibella and Sacharissa.

Rosie, whose real name (which is no better) is Casta Albinia AUegra Dove Minerva Fidelia Aletta Blythe Domnia Delida Aurelia Grace Isabel Griselda Gwyneth Pearl Ruby Coral Lily Iris Briar-Rose, takes care to avoid the ladies-in-waiting.

Instead, Rosie occupies her time by carving spindle ends and Peony occupies her time by sewing. By the night before the birthday celebration, Rosie has finished her last spindle end—a head that, like the charm that binds them, is carved to resemble both Rosie and Peony—and Peony has managed to hem and repair all of the household linens. This puts the princess and her best friend in stark contrast to the ladies-inwaiting and it enables McKinley to draw strong comparisons between cultivated, domestic and generally passive femininity and true heroic character regardless of gender.

The considerations of identity, identification and inherent nobility in book four of Spindle's End, are directed at the literary form of the fairy tale in book five. By continuing to assert her novel as a retelling of a particular fairy tale, and by having her characters refer to fairy tales as being fantastic, unrealistic, but totally credible, McKinley heightens her readers' awareness of the refashioning and contemporizing of the fairy tale form as it is practiced in Spindle's End. McKinley's assertions are as relevant in book one, where we are reminded that There were stories that didn't sound like nursery tales, about companies of leopards and lynxes and dragons and wolves that had fought at the sides of various kings and queens many years ago; but maybe those were merely nursery tales for grown-ups. History was as unreliable as almost everything else that was influenced by magic in this country—which was nearly everything—and those stories could have been true or they could not have been true; as they are relevant in book five, when Pernicia appears at the birthday celebration. The long-awaited danger finally upon them, Peony rushes forward to prick her finger on the spindle intended for Rosie and the kingdom is plunged into sleep.

At first Rosie is also asleep, but she is not breathing, and it takes Narl's kiss upon her cheek to make her breathe and to wake her up. Narl reveals himself to be a fairy smith, something he has not shared with anyone (and something he assumed the animals had told Rosie. They had not). Because Narl has "a bit of—cold iron .. . welded into [his] smith's chain" offering "some protection against some things," he has not been struck down by Pernicia's sleeping spell.

Upon discovering that everyone is asleep— even Katriona, Aunt and Peony—Rosie remarks to herself that "[s]leep is the sister to death," using the word 'sister' to solidify her relationships to her family, her friend, and the magic that binds them. In so doing, Rosie also describes the very real threat contained in "Sleeping Beauty," despite modern demythicization of the power and scope of fairy tales In the Great Hall of Woodwold, the only characters awake are Rosie, Narl, and the many animals who rally

around Rosie with the knowledge that the human being who can speak to them—and for them—is the princess, and that she needs their help. In order to confront Pernicia, they must find their way out of Woodwold, understood to be protecting its inhabitants by entirely surrounding itself with roses and briars. The Great Hall through which Rosie's band moves, where the revelers all lie asleep, is described as "an eerie landscape, something out of a fairy tale," and the reader is told that "magic was never as comprehensive as this, not in real life." When they consider how they might find their way out of Woodwold, in order to confront Pernicia and save their loved ones and the kingdom, 388 Spindle's End Rosie states: "I suppose we should try the front doors first? It doesn't seem very likely, but it.. . who knows what the rules are in a fairy tale." McKinley's references remind us that fairy tales have potent dimensions, that they are the literary precursors to fantasy—the genre to which McKinley assigns her work.

But the front doors of Woodwold are barred. In the reversal of passive femininity anticipated from McKinley's characters and expected of contemporary retellings for young adults, it is Rosie who borrows Ikor's sword and cuts through the briars surrounding Woodwold. Similarly, towards the end of the novel, after Rosie, Narl, and several animal friends confront and defeat Pernida, it is Rosie who kisses Peony awake — again subverting passive femininity as well as some of the subtle eroticism of "Sleeping Beauty" (this is, after all, a retelling for young adults).

About the Author

Robin McKinley was born Jennifer Robin Carolyn McKinley on November 16, 1952 in Warren, Ohio. McKinley's father was in the Navy, so she grew up traveling— and reading. Among her literary influences are Andrew Lang's Blue Fairy Book, C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia,J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, and T. W. White's The Once and Future King.

McKinley influences and experiences can be seen in her work: her main characters are invariably strong, moral and heroic young women with a fondness for horses and dogs. She attended a preparatory school in Bethel, Maine called Gould Academy.

McKinley's interaction with fairy tale classics recalls her own girlhood, and this cherished time fuels her writing. Born a "Navy brat," Robin McKinley moved throughout her childhood. This resulted in few lasting friendships with other children. In response, McKinley developed a private, literary world and a rich imagination. Her imagination, her books, and her animal friends were McKinley's best companions while growing up, and the same may be said for Rosie—the princess who is cursed by an evil fairy and secreted away in Book One of Spindle's End. She has been quoted as saying that "[s]he believes .. . that most girls go through a time growing up when they believe they must have an innate greatness and destiny beyond the apparent; that they are in fact lost princesses, switched at birth."

McKinley attended Dickinson College from 1970-1972, and to Bowdoin College, from which she graduated summa cum laude in 1975. She has worked as a book editor, transcriber, research assistant, bookstore clerk, teacher and counselor, barn manager, editorial assistant, freelance editor, and full-time author. Her hobbies include opera, gardening, jogging, going for long walks with her dogs (Rowan, Holly, and Hazel, all of whom are whippets), cooking, reading, English change ringing, and fencing. McKinley lives in Hampshire, (southern) England with her husband Peter Dickinson (who is also a fantasy writer), her 3 whippets, 500 rosebushes and a cream-colored 1965 MGB convertible.

Robin McKinley has won many awards for her writing. Her novel Beauty was included in 1966-1988 Best of the Best Books for Young Adults (ALA), the 1979 Fanfare Honor List (Horn Book), and the 1979 Books for the Teen Age (New York Public Library).

The Blue Sword won the Newbery Award in 1995, and its sequel, The Hero and the Crown, was a Newbery Honor Book for 1983.

McKinley's anthology, Imaginary Lands, won the World Fantasy Award for Best Anthology in 1986; A Knot in the Grain was featured on the Horn Book Fanfare Honor List in 1995; Rose Daughter was a Locus Recommended Book in 1997. Robin McKinley has also written several essays.

Setting

McKinley reminds us that some of the greatest magic is in nature's miracles: "Births were very closely attended, because the request that things stay what they were had to be got in quickly, birth being a very great magic, and, in that country, likely to be teased into mischief." For these reasons, and because human beings are always attentive to the doings of royalty and government, news of the birth of a princess spreads quickly. The princess' name—Casta Albinia Allegra Dove Minerva Fidelia Aletta Blythe Domnia Delicia Aurelia Grace Isabel Griselda Gwyneth Pearl Ruby Coral Lily Iris BriarRose—reminds the reader of fairy tale princesses even as it pokes gentle and goodhumored fun at them.

McKinley continues to remind us that we must treat the literary fairy tale form with respect while we shape it. Fairy tales are the mythic foundations of our literary culture, and those mythic elements—the phallic sword that cuts through the briars, the spindle end that recalls the ambivalent, limited safety of hearth and home, the awakening kiss, and the enchanted landscape that shapes us so that we may shape the world and our art—are still significant and potent today. It is by retelling, by augmenting and customizing, the fairy tale form that we keep it alive; and this is the ultimate show of respect.

In book one of Spindle's End, we are first introduced to the landscape and to the particular province of the kingdom in which the novel takes place. Like the humans, animals, and houses that reside there, the landscape of Spindle's End functions as a character. It is curiously alive, though with a longer lifespan and memory than many of the novels' characters, and it is equally susceptible to being bewitched—not least of all because the landscape, like the magic that McKinley describes, is natural and real.

Here, magic and religion cohabitate (if not always comfortably). And, as is common in McKinley's novels, the fantastic kingdom is completely and beautifully imagined.

McKinley describes how life in those parts has been translated into custom and practice: The people of this country had developed a reputation among outsiders for being unusually pious, because of the number of things they appeared to mutter a blessing over before they did them; but in most cases this was merely the asking of things it was safer to ask to remain nonmagical first, while work or play or food preparation or whatever was being got on with.

Social Sensitivity

A contemporary retelling, for all the reasons discussed here, cannot help but to give voice to current perceptions of social sensitivity. Robin McKinley's Spindle's End gives expression to contemporary, feminist-informed expectations of gender by translating outdated norms and by reawakening characters that have been historically and traditionally flattened into twodimensionality—as befits a retelling of "Sleeping Beauty." In liberating the sleeping landscape and the trapped, but no less imagined (nor any less real) animal world, Spindle's End describes our philosophies and ideologies regarding our environment and the creatures with whom we inhabit that environment. And in negotiating the mythic elements of the human experience through a memory- and dream-laden halfdeath, a long sleep, we maintain the mythic elements of the human experience in a mindful and conscientious manner. This is, after all and at its best, what contemporary retellings of folk and fairy tales can achieve.

Ultimately, Robin McKinley's Spindle's End rewards the reader. For, in reading it, we are given the best of the fantastic past and the promise of a fantastic future.

Literary Qualities

Ultimately, the creation of "we" includes the collaborating fantasist and her readers.

This interaction is among the literary qualities of Spindle's End that draw upon classic fantasy. In positioning all of us—the storyteller, the reader, the characters both human and animal, the landscape—as participant in the making of fantastic reality, McKinley also positions her novel within the genre.

McKinley's fantasies—and her retellings in particular—also provide a fascinating response to contemporary literary criticism.

Spindle's End encourages a creative interpretation of the critically noted sexism (Zipes), eroticism (Coover), Freudian/Elektra Complex (Bettelheim), and psychological feminism (Von Franz), available in the "Sleeping Beauty" tale. Indeed, McKinley's novel, like the reader, is subsequently enriched by these various foci of contemporary literary criticism.

McKinley's expressive animals do not gesture towards C. S. Lewis; her landscape, while rich, is not the invented world(s) of J. R. R. Tolkien. Robin McKinley is not shaping medieval romance into fantasy, as some critics would assert all fantasy does.

McKinley is working from an even deeper, more mythic source when shaping a retelling. She is working from the earth. And she is shaping the genre of fantasy even while she contributes to the shaping of the literary anthropology of a tale.

Either by naming them in her short stories or by alluding to them through her narrative style, McKinley's work gestures towards contemporary influences (Diana Wynne Jones and her husband, writer Peter Dickinson, among them), as well as classic influences (E. Nesbit and [all of] Lang; additionally, Narl, McKinley's fairy smith, shares his name with the smith in Lord Dunsany's The King of Elfland's Shadow).

Historically and collectively, fairy tales and tales about fairies belong firmly within the construct of the literary canon that McKinley reminds us (in Beauty, in A Knot in the Grain, and elsewhere) that she, too, has read, and by which she has also been influenced. The contested father of mythic fantasy, Lord Dunsany's narratives are important to McKinley's work with literary tradition. The imaginative realm of magic and of young adulthood, honorably described and touchingly remembered, is a realm shared by the two authors. In Dunsany's The Charwoman's Shadow, the exchange of the soul for immortality, and the loss of innocence that must be recovered in order for there to be joy and to be considered one of the "we" of this world, offers the same spiritual and psychological lessons as Spindle's End, wherein a girl must trust her greatest gifts (friendship and community among them), in order to defeat a villain capable of global terrorism. Dunsany's The King of Elfland's Daughter, in which the tragic protagonist is never able to recover with his reasoning mind that which his heart has lost, is the faint whisper in Spindle's End reminding us that we too must hold on to the magic of young adult fantasy; for, if we do, as Sigil's tiny spider and fairy self repeatedly asserts: "all will

be well." The shared realm of mythic fantasy is a realm in which we learn that which is most important to the human experience. We learn it through finely crafted metaphors—translating truth and accuracy into fantastic possession, just as we learn it through retellings—translating mythic tales into contemporary expressions.

McKinley's references to the act of retelling and to the fairy tale form are a particularly successful way of opening up comparisons between the tale of "Sleeping Beauty" and Spindle's End. These references invite the reader to consider how the two texts are alike, how they are different, and what that says about our contemporary, literary relationships to fairy tales. It is not surprising that Rosie, the female hero of Spindle's End, should be a strong, brave, and intelligent young woman who defeats evil with common sense and with love.

Advances won by women's rights movements, as well as current trends in, and demands for, "girl-powered" texts, have resulted in the proliferation of active, female role-models who celebrate young women's inherent abilities even as they recall the pulsing heart and triumphant Good of fairy tales. It is not surprising that the independent-minded animals with whom Rosie speaks recall our changing attitudes towards animal rights. Nor is it surprising that the fairies in Spindle's End have a wellbalanced respect for the world that is shaped by magic, and that they have a moderate attitude towards the magic that they shape.

Contemporary concerns for the environment and our changing attitudes towards earth-friendly spiritual practices (as well as our horror at the violent reactions to subversively matriarchal—but generally earth-friendl— "witches" of the past) must also guide a contemporary reteller's hand.

Themes and Characters

Robin McKinley's Spindle's End is an antecedent of mythic and mythologized literature. Thematically, this means that mythic elements—the sword, the spindle, the kiss; birth and death; good versus evil—the tex tual qualities that Joseph Campbell describes as symbolic of the play of eternity in time and Jane Yolen terms "the larger dreams of humankind, a patchwork of all the smaller dreams stitched together by time" are available in Spindle's End.

Peony is classic princess material. What's more, Rosie and Peony have already been so much a part of each other's lives as to leave deep and lasting impressions; they share habits and gestures. It is believed (by Sigil, Ikor, Aunt and Katriona) that Rosie and Peony's friendship is a kind of magic that will prove useful when they combine arts to save the princess and to thwart Pernicia. So they bind the two girls together with a charm.

The reader of McKinley's Spindle's End is asked to consider the relationship between mistaken identity and mistaken identification. The public believes what fairy tales have encouraged them to believe and the reader receives a valuable lesson about the definition of the self.

There is a bridge between the mythic and the contemporary in McKinley's work.

In Spindle's End, as in all her work, McKinley explores the timeless dimensions of mythic (heroic) literature' and the human experience. Spindle's End is an example of faithfulness, duty and honor, those themes played out by McKinley's characters. And though these are familiar ideals of McKinley's females, they are just as available in McKinley's men, her creatures, and her magical landscape.

Additionally, there are other (less mythic but still ideal) themes that correspond to contemporary concerns; these are revealed when the text describes who we are to ourselves. Such themes are the description of young adults and of gender, the relationship between the characters and their environment, and the ways in which McKinley's landscape refers to classic and contemporary fantasy literature.

Because it is a retelling, the themes explored in Robin McKinley's Spindle's End encourage us to read the novel as a description of our interaction with a narrative art form much longer lived than we are. As a result, the novel positions our location and our time; it pinpoints our literary dendrochronology. McKinley's Spindle's End mirrors our current demands and interpretations of fairy tales as well as our current engagements with fantasy literature.

McKinley distinguishes her characters by their speech. This enables her to describe their personalities through their habits of communication. We are told that insects are the most difficult to communicate with, that most animals do not know how to translate (or are unconcerned about) a concept as human as "honor"—though they are

honorable, and we are told that you'll never get anywhere in a conversation with a cat unless you pretend to believe that cats are colleagues rather than pets. That the princess gifted with beast-speech is comforted by the expressive wordlessness of Narl, the fairy smith is hiding, is a credit to McKinley's humane, fully-imagined, and masterfully crafted characterization. In McKinley's fantasy, we are given an accurate mirror. She reminds us, too, that "accuracy" is not a stand-in for "realistic."

Textual mirrors are a form of intimacy.

Thus, our relationships to the characters in the mirror of the novel, characters that have been crafted at this point in the continuum of "Sleeping Beauty," are profound and immediate. McKinley writes with complete clarity, never oversimplifying either her text or her readers and the characters in Spindle's End are as numerous and as exact in their personalities as the members of a cottage, a village, or a kingdom truly might be.

There are no insignificant characters in Spindle's End: Cairngorm the pub owner is as memorable as Zel the fox. Characters whose stories are organic, like Aunt, who has always been there, or who are transplants and travelers like Katriona and Peony, are as multi-dimensional and psychologically complex as characters in disguise, like Rosie, Rowland, and Narl. In the end, it is the wise white merrel, chained by one foot to the high rafters of Woodwold's Great Hall because of a broken wing that did not set properly, who brings Pernicia to justice as his one last brave magic act. In McKinley's literary worldview, we all have an "innate greatness"—regardless of classification (human or otherwise). McKinley creates a heroic "we" rather than a heroic "I" in Spindle's End, and this extends from the characterization within her fantastic novel to the character of her novel within the fantastic.

Topics for Discussion

1. Robin McKinley's Spindle's End is a retelling of the fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty."

What are some of the similarities between McKinley's novel and the fairy tale? What are some of the differences?

2. In many fantasy novels (I. K. Rowling's Harry Porter books, for example), witches are women and wizards are men. But in Robin McKinley's Spindle's End, fairies are both women and men. Is there a difference between witches and wizards and fairies? Explain.

392 Spindle's End 3. In Spindle's End, Robin McKinley tells us Katriona's story (books 1 & 2) before she tells us Rosie's story (books 3-5).

What might be Robin McKinley's reasons for doing this? to set-up the Gig before she retells "Sleeping Beauty"? to focus exclusively on young adult characters throughout her novel? to tell the part of Rosie's story that we need to know (even if Rosie doesn't)?

4. What other novels by Robin McKinley have you read? How does Spindle's End compare with McKinley's other works?

Which novel do you like best and why?

5. Is Robin McKinley's Spindle's End a retelling or a fantasy? Or is it both?

6. In Spindle's End, Rosie is given special gifts by her fairy godparents (and by Katriona)—the gifts of golden hair, of blue eyes, of flawless white skin, of lips like cherries, of teeth like pearls, of feet that never stumble and fingers that never falter, of a sweet singing voice and a laugh like a silver bell, of peerless embroidery and sublime sweetmeats, of spinning, and (however accidentally), the gift of beast-speech. Which one of Rosie's gifts would you most like to have and why?

7. If you did have your choice of Rosie's gifts, what would you do with it? Katriona thinks Rosie's gifts are pretty useless.

How would you make your gift useful and important (to yourself, your friends and family, even the world)? Where in the novel are Rosie's gifts put to a better purpose than originally planned?

8. In the last exciting chapters of Spindle's End, the reader is reminded that: magic can't do everything. As seen in the novel, what can magic do and what can't it do?

9. Imagine that Rosie came over to your house and talked to your animals. What might your animals tell Rosie about themselves, your family and friends, and you?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Robin McKinley lives in southern England, where it is almost always cool and rainy. This is also true of the Gig in Spindle's End. Do some research into England—its climate, its political and religious history, its cultural practices, etc. In what ways are the two lands similar? In what ways are they different? Do you think Robin McKinley's fantastic world is really set in England?

2. In Spindle's End, Narl reveals himself to be a fairy smith; he refers to the tales of the fairy smiths as being about his ancestors. Using your research tools, find and read other stories about fairy smiths and describe how are the fairy tale fairy smiths are like or unlike Narl. Conclude by explaining to which tales you think Robin McKinley was referring.

3. Robin McKinley worked for some time (1982-1985) as a barn manager. As such, she helped take care of horses. Find out more about horses and use your research findings to explain how much Robin McKinley used her practical knowledge when writing Spindle's End.

4. Biographer Marilyn Karrenbrock has written: "McKinley's females do not simper; they do not betray their own nature to win a man's approval. But neither do they take love lightly or put their own desires before anything else.

In McKinley's books, the romance, like the adventure, is based upon ideas of faithfulness, duty, and honor." Using three female characters in Spindle's End (such as Katriona, Peony and Rosie), either prove or disprove Karrenbrock's statement.

Spindle's End 393 5. On her Web site, McKinley writes about receiving letters from students who have read her book(s) for school. But she also writes a little about what kinds of letters she most likes to receive from her readers (and what kind of letters she might be willing to answer!). Using McKinley's remarks as your guideline, write a letter to McKinley that you think she would like. After the final draft of your letter has been approved by your teacher, you might want to send it to Robin McKinley, care of her publisher: Robin McKinley, c/o Greenwillow Press, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10019.

6. In Robin McKinley's Spindle's End, she describes an old-time village square, complete with a pub, a smith's forge, a wheelwright and a wainwright. Even though McKinley's novel is fantasy, you can still use it for historical research.

What does a smith do? What does a wheelwright or a wainwright do? At what point in time were these professions necessary to a village? Use your findings to estimate the year in which Spindle's End might have been set (if it wasn't fantasy, that is).

7. Robin McKinley has said that she was influenced and inspired by Andrew Lang's Blue Fairy Book, C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia, and J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the

Rings. Read (some or all of) these other books and describe where, and in what way, you can feel their influence in Robin McKinley's Spindle's End.

8. Other fantasy writers that you might have read are Peter Dickinson (Robin McKinley's husband), J. K. Rowling (the Harry Potter books), Susan Cooper (the Dark is Rising Sequence), and Philip Pullman (the His Dark Materials Trilogy). Compare and contrast Robin McKinley's Spindle's End with the novel of another contemporary fantasy author. Be sure to research the authors' lives (using their websites, biographies, or entries about them in research texts.

Compare and contrast the two authors lives. In what ways are their lives similar or different? Can you find out something about the authors that might help to explain why they write fantasy?

For Further Reference

Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 52: American Writers for Children since 1960: Fiction, Gale, 1986. This article provides an encyclopedic reference useful for high school and college-age students.

Kingman Lee, editor, Newbery and Caldecott Medal Books, 1976-1985, Horn Book, 1986.

This comprehensive list of past winners provides useful summary and bibliographic information.

Spivak, Charlotte, Merlin's Daughters: Contemporary Women Writers of Fantasy, Greenwood Press, 1987. This is a scholarly text on contemporary retellings of folk and fairy tales by women writers, in which McKinley is treated topically.

Related Titles/Adaptations

For related titles, the reader need only look so far as the folk and fairy tales that have inspired many of her novels: Madame Le Prince de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast," the legend of Robin Hood (see F. J. Child's collection and Dobson and Taylor's Rhymes of Robyn Hode, for capable listings and commentary), and Charles Perrault's "Donkeyskin."

Additionally, on her website and elsewhere, McKinley names her literary influences. Andrew Lang, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien (and, seemingly, Lord Dunsany) are among the masters of British fantasy. In Beauty, McKinley refers to several titles of modern literature that are held in the beast's library (including the works of Oscar Wilde — another author who worked in the fairy tale tradition). In A Knot in the Grain, McKinley refers to contemporary fantasy novels, such as those written by her husband, Peter Dickinson, and Diana Wynne Jones. The reader is encouraged to consider McKinley's work in the context of folk and fairy tales, canonical fantasy, classic literature, and contemporary fantasy.

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