

# Jack and the Fire Dragon – Background

## The Importance of Folk and Fairy Tales



Everyone enjoys reading fairy tales, but where do these stories come from, and what do they really mean in our lives?

Most fairy tales were originally folk tales (tales told by the folk or people) or myths. Some stories, like *Beauty and the Beast* and *Little Red Riding Hood*, certainly were ancient stories that grew from mythological roots. And surprisingly, so are such simple stories as *The Three Little Pigs* and *The Three Bears*.

Why have they survived, and why do we keep wanting to hear them? Simply put, it is because they are fun to hear and tell. They live from generation to generation and tie children to grandparents and their grandparents and on and on, forming part of our personal and cultural heritage.

Stories about giants, fairies or sorcerers, dragons, mermaids and other marvelous creatures are told in many different countries and seem to take on the characteristics of the local culture while remaining broadly recognizable as imaginary. They exist and live in the hearts and minds of people. Perhaps some of them emerged from dreams and daydreams, but they survive because people need them as a connection to preceding generations, to nurture imagination and creativity and to give us models for coping with conflict and with the unknown or unexpected.

Joseph Campbell, perhaps the greatest recent scholar of fairy tales and myths, was told by a child, “A myth (or fairy tale) is a story that doesn’t look true on the outside but is true on the inside.” These tales speak to the deeper core of humanity, our struggles – both internal and external – and our triumphs. They teach us how to live better lives and be better people. Even the violence in these tales has a purpose (justice), unlike much of modern television and video games.

Many stories about a lad named Jack have been popular for centuries and are examples of a hero who takes part in all the adventures that make up a hero saga. And his roots may be as old as the Tree of Life itself. In *Jack and the Bean Tree*, he climbs up to the sky on a vine he has planted himself. We know that this story goes back at least to Viking times when Jack was called Everyman. In the British Isles he is still called Everyman Jack. The story lends itself to today’s media. George Lucas borrowed some of Jack’s persona to create Luke Skywalker, a lad who travels in a space ship to landscapes in “Star Wars” only a little more bizarre than Jack’s climb up the Bean Tree to Skyland.

One of the fundamental appeals of these stories is that all of us can take on the role of the hero, “wear the skins” of the characters and see the world through their eyes. We get to live in a world in which we can defy gravity, have amazing strength or encounter creatures that we don’t find hanging around our neighborhood after school. The stories have been distilled down through the generations to the point that everyone can relate to them; these heroes are indeed “Everyman Jacks.”

*Jack and the Fire Dragon*, a story of Jack, the youngest of three sons, who goes underground where he meets a shape-changing dragon, is almost certainly an ancient tale. It might have survived into the mountains of Appalachia, where it is today, but it has trailing echoes of the ancient Greeks.

In *Jack and the Fire Dragon* and other Jack Tales, we find that the timeless Jack keeps “comin’ young” again and that “no one can keep Jack down for long—not even old man Death himself.” (quoted from Gail Haley’s book, *Mountain Jack Tales*)

### Credits

This explanation was written by Gail E. Haley, author of the serial story *Jack and the Fire Dragon* and a book titled *Mountain Jack Tales*. It was edited by Brian Sturm, storyteller and professor, UNC-CH School of Information and Library Science, and Jan Yopp, professor and associate dean, UNC-CH School of Journalism.

To learn more about folk, fairy tales and fractured fairy tales, visit the following Web sites:

- Tales of Wonder - <http://www.darsie.net/talesofwonder/>
- SurLaLaLune Fairy Tales - <http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/>
- The Grimm Brothers’ Children’s and Household Tales - <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimmtales.html>
- Google Directory for Fairy Tales - [http://directory.google.com/Top/Society/Folklore/Literature/Tales/Fairy\\_Tales/](http://directory.google.com/Top/Society/Folklore/Literature/Tales/Fairy_Tales/)