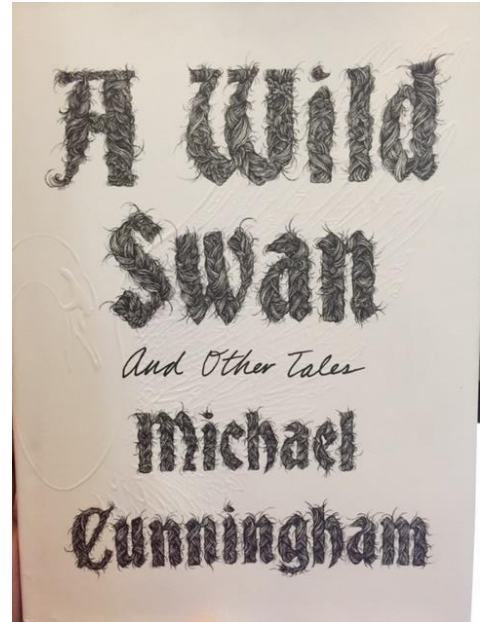


Tall Tales Cut Down to Size



Have you ever seen a tree that's been struck by lightning yet stays standing? The only clue that anything is different is the thin black burn mark running down it's trunk but inside the tree is charred and dead, and susceptible to the whims of nature. Well, *A Wild Swan and Other Tales* by Michael Cunningham is plain and simple the darkly-twisted, charred remnants of the fairy tales so many of us grew up with. The before's, after's or in between's that didn't make it into



the storybook. The stories all feel very modern; the characters are archetypes from this time, a mixture of morals from modern-day and medieval.

Unlike many books, the reader doesn't follow a single character, instead we meet many familiar faces. We are re-introduced to Beauty and the Beast, The Swan Princess, Jack, Snow White, and Rumpelstiltskin, among others. What if the beast was still beastly

inside? What if Rumpelstiltskin just desperately wanted to be a father?

Cunningham opens this collection with a preface of sorts, wherein he explains the societal acceptance of the worst things happening to the most spectacular of people because it brings them down to a level that the larger discontented majority can relate to. "If certain



manifestations of perfection can be disgraced, or disfigured...the rest of us will find ourselves living in a less arduous world; a world of more reasonable expectations..." As a societal skeptic or perhaps closet cynic I am all for the more critical lens Cunningham casts on society through these stories that have been retold so many times they're nearly clichés themselves. The original tales are imbued with morals that parents use to convince their children that good will triumph and perseverance pays off. Well, sometimes that just isn't true.

Most readers will be acquainted with Hansel and Gretel. But what if the witch in their tale was a societal outcast for being a woman who owns her sexuality? And the house she built was to lure visitors to cure her loneliness? In Cunningham's version the witch was just a woman who embraced her sexual agency. As s aged, she dreamed of teaching the younger generation to do the same. A cougar in full, her goal was educating the young men of her community in the art of seduction in service of the young women they would later marry. But they never came, after her looks left her, she was forgotten, no longer appealing to the men she once found pleasure with. The friends of her youth had deserted her as they raised children of their own and her choices no longer suited their company. Her house of candy was built in the fruitless hopes of intriguing passersby so that she might know the joys of company again or at least a face other than her own.

Cunningham eradicates the cliché and creates stories that we can place ourselves or someone we know into in the most realistic setting. However, if you are not a fan of hearing the "villain's" side of the story, if you lack empathy or just don't want the stories of your childhood altered in any way, *this is not the book for you*. If you like your heroes on a pedestal and lacking in all but the most endearing flaws, you should steer clear. However, if you love the "what happens after the happily ever after" of Sondheim's *Into The Woods* or if you loved Disney's *Maleficent*, then you might be a realist or willing to look at why somebody chose to hurt the beloved protagonist. I personally loved this book and would recommend it to all of my friends with a slightly twisted sense of humor, or those that have accepted the existence of their dark side.

Because according to Cunningham, most of us have one.

It's inevitable.

But there is surely room for redemption.



Title: A Wild Swan and Other Tales

Author: Michael Cunningham

Illustrator: Yuko Shimizu

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Pages: 134

Price:\$23.00

Can be purchased at:

<http://www.riversendbookstore.com/book/9780374290252>

Carlene Smith is a senior at SUNY Oswego majoring in Creative Writing with a concentration in Poetry and a second major in Studio Art. She grew up in a small town in the Fingerlakes region and has an unhealthy fondness for junk-food and Netflix in her infrequent free-time. She has worked as a Poetry Editor for the Great Lakes Review and hopes to land an exceptional internship after graduation to start building her literary career.