

∞ READING ROUND ∞

The Classic Book I'd Like To Rewrite and Why

Trish Cooke

I HAVE A FASCINATION with fairy tales like *Cinderella*, *Red Riding Hood*, *Pinocchio*, and the many folk tales and characters from the Caribbean, like Anansi the Spider Man and Compère Lapin. I love exploring and reinventing these classic characters and tales.

Between 2005 and 2017, I had the pleasure of writing pantomimes for the Theatre Royal Stratford East. I enjoyed going back to the original tales, some of which were very dark, and reading them over and over, to identify the key elements in the stories, before writing my own version. Putting my take on the stories, that is, finding my truth within them, and making the stories current and relevant for a contemporary family audience is my aim. Great classic stories can always be retold. Many of these tales have been passed down over the years, and are constantly changing in accordance with the storyteller's perspective.

In 2021 I was commissioned to rewrite three fairy tales in the form of board books. The brief was that the stories were to focus on Black protagonists and their natural hair. I wrote my version of *Rapunzel — Zel: Let Out Your Hair*: a child whose afro hair grows up and out, not at all like the version of *Rapunzel* I'd grown up on. In that version, Rapunzel's hair is long and straight and grows downwards and she is rescued by a prince — not a myth I would like to perpetuate. I also wrote my version of *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *Pinocchio* to complete the Hairy Tale package. The books were only two hundred words long and heavily illustrated for the very young. As an author my aim is to address the imbalance. In 2019 only two

∞ READING ROUND ∞

percent of children's books in the UK and twelve percent in the US were about Black characters. How can that be acceptable?

So what is the next classic book I would like to rewrite and why? Well, after writing a version of *Rapunzel* as a pantomime for the Theatre Royal Stratford East in 2017 and then the board book, *Zel: Let Out Your Hair* for Woke Babies in 2021, I haven't finished with *Rapunzel* yet, so I have decided to write a version for slightly older children, called *The Magic Callaloo*, which Walker Books have agreed to publish in 2024. In this book, I am replacing the vegetable Rapunzel (on which the original story is based) with the Callaloo plant — a Caribbean leaf vegetable. When you introduce new elements into a story, the story tells you what that new version should be, and I listen. Although *The Magic Callaloo* is fiction, in my new tale, I pay homage to my ancestors and the roads they walked for freedom.