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Foreigners, fibs and fairytales

Hans Christian Andersen's life might have been a fairytale but his fairytales are not always happy ones, says TABISH KHAIR. 2005 marks the 200th birth anniversary of the writer.

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H.C. Andersen: The man who remained an outsider. Rudolph Striegler, the foremost carte-de-visite photographer of the times, captures this solitude in this portrait taken in 1861.

My life is a and fairytales MY life is a fairytale, wrote Hans Christian Andersen, the famous Danish writer of fairy tales — eventyr in Danish — in one of the many autobiographies that he also penned. And, as in all fairytales, there was a germ of truth in that claim — as well as a dash of fantasy.

Born in 1805 into a poor family in Odense, then the second most important town in Denmark (after Copenhagen), Andersen is arguably the most important writer of fairytales the world has known. Other famous fairytale writers, such as the German Grimm brothers, were primarily compilers and recorders of folk tales. Andersen created most of his fairytales and was, as he saw himself, a digter — a Danish word that translates as "poet" but actually comes closer to meaning "creative writer". He was also a driven maker of myths about his own family and past.

Haunted by his past

It is perhaps significant that the writer with whom we associate such tales of fantasy as "The

Little Mermaid", "The Tinder-Box", "The Staunch Tin Soldier", "The Princess and the Pea", "The Ugly Duckling", "Thumbelina", "The Nightingale" and many others was also a writer who reworked his own real life into almost all of his fairytales. He was like the master craftsman who makes a golden bird for the Emperor of China in "The Nightingale": a man who could refashion his own experiences and fears and uncertainties and mould them into almost unrecognisable forms of art. He was like the staunch tin soldier who, consumed by the fire of his own passion, melts into a silver heart.

Again and again, Andersen's past returns to haunt his fairy tales. The tin soldier who can never gain the hand of his beloved reflects the many ineffectual loves of the writer. The ugly duckling is the ungainly, socially inept Andersen at crucial and painful moments throughout his life. The godmothers and kind grandmothers of his tales are not unrelated to his own paternal grandmother, who fed Andersen many of the comfortable fibs about his family past that the writer was to embroider in three autobiographies and other accounts in his adult years. When the Ice Maiden comes to get Rudy in one tale, there is a clear echo of what Andersen's mother had said to him when, as a boy, he had seen his father lying dead: The ice maiden came for him, she had said, repeating a phrase of her dead husband. The small shivering girl in "The Little Match Girl", who burns match stick after match stick in a bid to warm herself outside the visible but inaccessible hearths of the rich, is an image of his mother, sent out to peddle wares in the bitter cold as a child.

But unlike the little match girl, Andersen's mother did not freeze to death. Born into a family characterised by penury and, what often comes with it, promiscuity, she grew up to be an illiterate and superstitious woman. After giving birth to an illegitimate daughter (who grew up with her grandparents and whom Andersen primly avoided in later life), she married a poor tradesman a literate "free thinker" who had not been able to escape his surroundings and who died when Andersen was only 11. But if his father inculcated in Andersen a love of the wider world and reading — he read out the fables of Jean de la Fontaine and stories from The Arabian Nights to the boy — his mother left him not only a useful legacy of folk religiosity but also, perhaps, something rarer. For instance, at an age when caning students was a principle of education, she insisted that her son should not be hit by the teacher. When the teacher forgot this injunction, she promptly removed Andersen from that school.

Schooling was not easy for Andersen. His parents inculcated in him a love for literature and the arts — in spite of being poor they went to plays — and his paternal grandmother explained to him (a fabrication) that actually her family had been rich and genteel in the past. These factors confirmed in Andersen a sense of his own destiny. He believed — and he was encouraged to believe — that he was made for finer things.

But such belief was difficult to sustain in the real world. Not only could his parents not afford to give him any education beyond basic literacy, Andersen was a slow learner and probably dyslectic. Like W.B. Yeats, he had trouble spelling words even in adulthood. But fired by juvenile hopes and encouraged by local success as a singer, he convinced his mother to let him go to Copenhagen at the age of 14. There, especially after his voice broke and shattered his hopes of a singing career, he knocked on every door he could find in a bid to get powerful patrons. And, partly by the force of his own convictions and partly by retelling stories of his poor background, he managed to gain affluent and accomplished supporters in his bid to be singer, dancer, actor, writer — anything that had to do with the literary arts.

Andersen wanted to be famous — and rich. But he would be rich on his own terms. When a safe trade-apprenticeship was offered by a rich patron, he turned it down with the remark that "it would be a sin": the implication being that Andersen was destined — by God, as his mother might have believed, or through his own talents, as his agnostic father might have claimed — to be nothing other than a digter. But Andersen's talents were little in evidence at that age, cobbled as he was by his lack of higher education in an age that venerated the classics.

Finally, realisation dawned and, partly forced by his patrons, Andersen started going to grammar school. He was 17 and most of his fellow students were about five years younger than him.

Grammar school was not easy for Andersen — plagued as he was by an irate master who disliked romantic ideas of talent — and Andersen never really gave in to narrow notions of intellectual discipline. Still, the knowledge that he gained over the next few years stood him in good stead. He wrote his first acclaimed work — a poem about a dying child — while still at grammar school. Later followed a number of collections of poems, novels and travel accounts, some of which were lambasted in Denmark and some of which went on to be huge international successes. By then, his mother had died — after years as an alcoholic (she started drinking to keep warm while standing in the water to wash other people's clothes) — having observed the first steps of her son's success with fierce pride.

By the time Andersen started writing his fairytales, he was a visible writer. He had readers and powerful admirers. Always international in his focus — incidentally, he even had a French godfather and wrote his first adolescent play, inspired partly by Shakespeare, in a mixture of Danish, English, Latin and German — and fiercely critical of Danish self-complacency and provincialism, Andersen had already obtained a significant readership in Germany and other European lands. But had he not written the fairytales, he would have been nothing but an interesting minor writer. The fairytales allowed Andersen to cultivate his real strengths, which included a feeling for colloquial language, a sense of humour and a lively romantic imagination that was rooted in intense (and, like his bi-sexuality, often suppressed) personal and social experiences. With the fairytales followed not only fame but also immortality.

A desire to be recognised

When H.C. Andersen died in 1875, he had dined with famous writers, philosophers, singers, actors; he had been lauded by children and kings. But to some extent, he never lost his social insecurity — which sometimes made him ludicrously anxious for petty honours. He had a desperate desire to be loved and a burning desire to be recognised. He could have only one of these two desires fulfilled, at least during his lifetime. His life might have been a fairytale, but his fairytales are not always happy ones.

H.C. Andersen's 200th birth anniversary will be observed as a national event in Denmark this year. But perhaps it is more appropriate to celebrate him outside the confines of any national identity, any state. Perhaps it is necessary to remember not only that he belongs to all of us now but also that his books teemed with foreigners and foreignness, both of which are not really welcome in Denmark today.