**2c Page 27 READING TEXT**

Upper Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

Once upon a time ...

Once upon a time there lived in Germany two brothers who loved a good story – one with magic and danger, royalty and villains. At school they met a wise man who led them to a treasure – a library of old books with tales more enchanting than any they had ever heard. Inspired, the brothers began collecting their own stories, listening to the folktales people told them. Soon they produced their own treasure – a book of fairy tales that would charm millions in faraway lands for generations to come.

The brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, named their story collection *Children’s and Household Tales* and published it in Germany in 1812. The collection has been translated into more than 160 languages, from Inupiat in the Arctic to Swahili in Africa. As a world publishing phenomenon it competes with the Bible. The stories and their characters continue to feature in virtually every media: theatre, opera, comic books, movies, paintings, rock music, advertising, fashion. The Japanese have built two theme parks devoted to the tales. In the United States the Grimms’ collection helped launch Disney as a media giant.

Such fame would have shocked the humble Grimms. During their lifetimes the collection sold few copies in Germany. The early editions were not even aimed at children. They had no illustrations, and scholarly footnotes took up almost as much space as the tales themselves. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm viewed themselves as patriotic students of folklore. They began their work at a time when Germany had been occupied by the French under Napoleon. The new rulers suppressed local culture. As young scholars, the brothers Grimm began work on the fairy tale collection in order to save the endangered oral storytelling tradition of Germany.

Long before the Grimms’ time, storytelling thrived in inns, barns and the homes of peasant women. During winter nights, as they sat spinning wool, women kept each other company and entertained themselves with tales of adventure, romance and magic. Altogether, 40 such storytellers delivered tales to the Grimms, many of them coming to their house in Kassel. One of them, ‘Marie’, was credited with narrating many of the most famous tales: *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*. But these were not from the German oral tradition. Marie had had French nannies who retold stories to her that they themselves had read in a collection written by Charles Perrault in 1697, *Tales of My Mother Goose*.

Although the brothers implied that they were just keeping records of tales, Wilhelm continued to polish and reshape the stories up to the final edition of 1857. In an effort to make them more acceptable to children and their parents, he stressed the moral of each tale, and emphasised gender roles. According to the Grimms, the collection served as ‘a manual of manners.’ To this day, parents read them to their children because they approve of the lessons in the stories: keep your promises, don’t talk to strangers, work hard, obey your parents.

Yet despite all Wilhelm’s additions, the core of these stories was left untouched, in all their medieval coarseness. The cruel treatment of children (the children Hansel and Gretel are put in a cage by a witch and then fattened ready for eating), the violent punishments handed out to the stories’ villains (in the original *Snow White* the evil stepmother is forced to dance in red-hot iron shoes until she falls down dead), are too much for some parents.

So what accounts for their popularity? Some have suggested it is because the characters are always striving for happiness. But the truth probably lies in their origin. Grimms tales were born out of a storytelling tradition without boundaries of age or culture. The brothers’ skill was to translate these into a universal style of writing that seems to mirror whatever moods or interests we bring to our reading of them. And so it was that the Grimms’ fairy tales lived happily ever after.

coarseness (n) /ˈkɔː.snəs/ being rough and down-to-earth; a lack of sophistication or refinement

folklore (n) /ˈfəʊkˌlɔːr/ the traditional songs, stories, proverbs, legends of a society

nanny (n) /ˈnani/ a woman paid to look after young children

spin (v) /spɪn/ to make natural fibre (like wool) into thread

Life