



Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness

By Carole G. Silver

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Teeming with creatures, both real and imagined, this encyclopedic study in cultural history illuminates the hidden web of connections between the Victorian fascination with fairies and their lore and the dominant preoccupations of Victorian culture at large. Carole Silver here draws on sources ranging from the anthropological, folkloric, and occult to the legal, historical, and medical. She is the first to anatomize a world peopled by strange beings who have infiltrated both the literary and visual masterpieces and the minor works of the writers and painters of that era.

Examining the period of 1798 to 1923, *Strange and Secret Peoples* focuses not only on such popular literary figures as Charles Dickens and William Butler Yeats, but on writers as diverse as Thomas Carlyle, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Charlotte Mew; on artists as varied as mad Richard Dadd, Aubrey Beardsley, and Sir Joseph Noel Paton; and on artifacts ranging from fossil skulls to photographs and vases. Silver demonstrates how beautiful and monstrous creatures--fairies and swan maidens, goblins and dwarfs, cretins and changelings, elementals and pygmies--simultaneously peopled the Victorian imagination and inhabited nineteenth-century science and belief. Her book reveals the astonishing complexity and fertility of the Victorian consciousness: its modernity and antiquity, its desire to naturalize the supernatural, its pervasive eroticism fused with sexual anxiety, and its drive for racial and imperial dominion.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Clap if you believe in fairies! The Victorians did, writes Carole Silver in *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness*, but she's not exactly talking about Tinkerbell here. Silver prefers the more gruesome and treacherous species of fay: changelings and vampires, brownies and goblins. The Victorians took these creatures very seriously, indeed, and according to Silver, this belief tapped into some of their society's most fundamental anxieties. Fear of physical deformity, of women's sexual power, of racial or class difference: these were the true bogeymen that haunted the Victorian imagination, and they responded with a flood of art, literature, and theater that portrayed these imaginary creatures with equal measures of fascination and horror. Silver even argues that many if not most Victorians believed in the actual physical existence of fairies, citing contemporary news accounts as her evidence. Why fairies? Creatures of the imagination and of the rural past, they offered refuge from an increasingly mechanized and empirical age. More ominously, they also provided expression for some of an imperialist nation's nastier beliefs, embodied in figures from Dr. Jekyll to Snow White's dwarves. Exhaustively researched and engagingly written, *Strange and Secret Peoples* is an original look at the complexities and contradictions of Victorian culture.

From Publishers Weekly

In this engaging and richly illustrated survey, Silver shows how popular superstitions, academic studies of folklore and widespread anxiety over modernization combined to bring magical creatures to life in the minds of Victorian Britons. Silver (*The Romance of William Morris*) examines representations of fairies and their supernatural kin in literature and painting, and finds that the influence of these so-called elementals extended well beyond the walls of middle-class nurseries. By placing fairy stories alongside both Stanley's sensational reports from the Congo and gross misapplications of Darwinian evolutionary theory, she reveals the stories to be warped historical records of a peculiarly charged moment in modern British culture. Silver demonstrates that fairies, dwarfs, ogres, banshees and other such members of the "elfin tribes" often took on the physical attributes of supposedly "primitive" peoples such as the Pygmies, and she shows how scientific efforts to establish the reality of fairies led, ironically, to the definitive refutation of their existence. While Silver rounds up what have become the usual suspects in academic studies of the supernatural (W.B. Yeats, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, to name a few), she also brings in less celebrated but equally colorful characters: romantic painter Henry Fuseli, "armchair explorer" R.G. Haliburton and kidnapped Pygmy Ota Benga, who in 1904 was displayed as the "missing link" in the monkey house of the Bronx Zoo. Learned and engrossing, Silver's exhaustive study synthesizes intellectual history, literary criticism and earthy folk myth.

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From Library Journal

In an academic yet highly accessible style, Silver (English/humanities, Yeshiva Univ.) explores the Victorian belief in fairies, goblins, changelings, and other paranormal creatures of the British Isles. Although the reach of science expanded during this period, Victorian newspapers made serious reference to fairy abductions, fairy brides, and physical attacks by little people. Silver tracks these beliefs through the literature and art of the Victorians, exploring their effects on society and vice versa. Eventually, she hypothesizes, the fairies were reduced to children's fare as the "Golden Age" of children's literature began, or else they were sublimated in adult sf and fantasy, away from the mainstream. Well researched with an extensive list of works cited, this is essential for academic libraries, and highly recommended for public libraries as well. Katherine K. Koenig, Ellis Sch., Pittsburgh

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