

Reading Group Guide

1. Do you have a favorite fairy tale? One that spoke to you strongly when you were younger, or that touched you as an adult? Do you see another side of that story after reading about the themes in Geraldine's notes?
2. Though Geraldine and Marie were raised in the same house by the same parents, they had very different experiences and different outcomes for their lives. But in what ways are the sisters similar?
3. How do Marie and Geraldine handle the idea that a woman has to be "likeable"?
4. Marie seems very motivated by wanting to fix things for other people — Geraldine, Robbie, her ex-husband. But how does her ambition for herself influence her actions?
5. How is the relationship between Marie and Geraldine similar to the relationship between their mother and their aunt? How is it different?
6. Martin Monroe uses the abusive technique of "gaslighting" to try to keep control of his daughters. In what ways does Marie turn the tables on her father and "gaslight" him in return?
7. How likely is it that Geraldine would have followed through on her plans with Marie if it hadn't been for Tyler's fate?
8. Who is the good sister?
9. Do you think Robbie will be able to successfully leave Whitestone Harbor? Why or why not? Do you think having a new baby in the family will change the possibilities of his future?
10. Will Marie and Geraldine be able to break the cycle of family dysfunction for Geraldine's baby? Why or why not?
11. Setting plays an important part in *The Other Sister*. Would this story have been possible in a larger city?
12. Is Martin Monroe mentally ill? Or was he driven by circumstances to become what he is? Both? Neither?

ONCE UPON A TIME

An essay by Sarah Zettel

Fairy tales have always been a part of me.

I like to say I grew up inside a library. We moved multiple times when I was a child, but no matter which house we were living in, there were books in every room—shelves filled to overflowing.

But even in our house filled to the brim with books, one set was special. It was a long stretch of identical red volumes called “the Harvard Five-Foot Shelf.” My great-grandfather had purchased these books, and my father had inherited them. They were various classic texts: Cicero, Shakespeare, Darwin, John Stuart Mill, etc. The idea was that if you read them all (reading guide provided), you would have the basis of a liberal arts education.

This was where I found the fairy tales.

I don’t remember when or how I first pulled that particular red book out from all the others. *Tales: Aesop, Anderson and Grimm.*

I read through the fables, I read through (and got weirded out by) Hans Christian Anderson’s moral tales, and finally got to the selections from the Brothers Grimm.

I was familiar with all the standard fairy tales by the time I opened that red book. I knew how Cinderella and Rapunzel and Snow White went. At least I thought I did.

The stories I found in this book were not the familiar narratives. These were the versions so full of blood and guts that the Victorians felt morally obligated to start cleaning them up. In these stories, evil stepmothers are rolled downhill in nail-studded barrels. The frog-prince is transformed when the princess throws him against the wall. Cinderella’s sisters not only self-mutilate to try to fit the shoe, but Cinderella’s birds peck them blind, at her wedding no

less. Other princesses and peasant girls — unnamed and destined never to have bright cartoons for themselves — make their way through worlds of violence and assault. But these girls also call up magic winds, successfully cut deals with immensely powerful beings, keep impossible vows, and perform impossible tasks. Heaven itself frequently comes to their aid.

And when the girls do finally return home from their trials and adventures, things do not go well for their tormenters, and these women never lift a finger to stop it.

I adored these stories.

I loved all the magic and power and blood and gore. I loved the sheer untidiness and weirdness of them (because they are *really* weird).

This book became one of my secrets. Other people had the flat Disney Cinderella with the big dress and the bippity-boppity old lady. I had the inside scoop.

I knew that Cinderella created her own magic to get what she needed. But in the story that gets told most these days, she has to wait for outside intervention. Where Rapunzel originally carried on a long-term torrid affair with her prince, now it's a chaste kiss—or maybe two, if we're feeling daring. With each revision, raw power and bloody persistence were replaced by perfection and passivity.

But fairy tales are not just stories about girls. They are also about families and things going very wrong within families. They are about how people break apart and rejoin, and how things change, or don't when the outcast comes home.

So when I found myself ready to write about families, about homes, and about the tangled emotions that grow inside them; about concealed power and sheer determination, I went back to the fairy tales. It was there that I found a structure to let me explore the difference between appearing good and being good, between convincing others to use their power for you

and using your own power for yourself. These questions are central to women's lives, and they are central to the stories we tell about ourselves, our homes, our families, and our times.

And they are very much the stuff of fairy tales.

