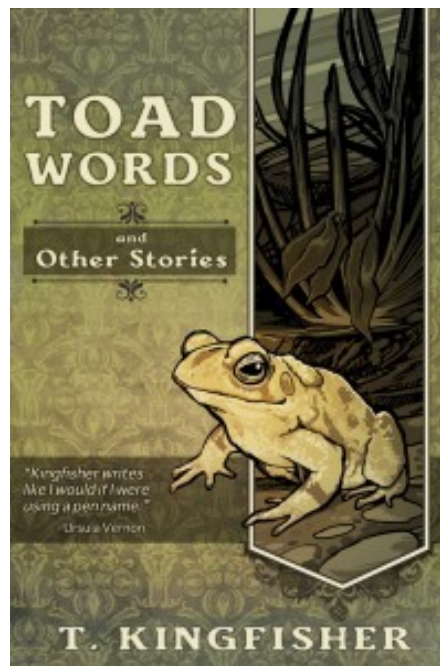




Toad Words and Other Stories

T. Kingfisher

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From author T. Kingfisher comes a collection of fairy-tale retellings for adults. By turns funny and dark, sad and lyrical, this anthology draws together in one volume such stories as "The Wolf and the Woodsman," "Loathly," and "Bluebeard's Wife," along with an all-new novella, "Boar & Apples."

Author's Note: Many of these stories have appeared in various forms on the author's blog.

Toad Words and Other Stories Details

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From Reader Review Toad Words and Other Stories for online ebook

Nikki says

If you've been following my reactions to T. Kingfisher's longer retellings, it's probably no surprise that I enjoyed this collection of short stories. Despite the stated belief that she can't write short stories, this should make it very obvious that she can: with wry humour, with tenderness, with care, with cleverness. Each of these stories has its own spin on the original fairytales; each has its own voice and shape, and sometimes it goes quite far from the original — but always in a way that I really enjoy. For example, the talking boars in 'Boar & Apples', which is a skewed retelling of Snow White.

If you're not reading T. Kingfisher yet, this would make a good introduction; there's plenty of bang for your buck here, because the stories give you a taster of all the author's talents (rather than being a single story like Bryony and Roses or The Raven and the Reindeer). Mind you, it's not like the other books are very expensive either; I totally recommend going for it and having a binge, if you enjoy fairytale retellings.

Of course, not all the stories were 100% to my taste, but that always happens, especially with short stories — I'm picky. It's a strong enough collection that I think what appeals to me less could well be someone else's favourite.

(My favourite story was 'Loathly'; though it doesn't explicitly reference Arthuriana, I enjoyed this take on the Loathly Lady a lot.)

Originally posted [here](#).

Heather says

I loved Digger, but I am *madly* in love with this story collection. It honestly reminds me a lot of the best of Connie Willis' short fiction, and it has a sensibility similar to that of Terry Pratchett. Go, read this. Now!

Karina says

Tear-wrenching and hilarious stories, often *at the same time*, this was so lovely and now I need every single thing written by Vernon/Kingfisher. Felt quite Diana Wynne Jones-esque, but certainly brought its own apples to the table. (And impossible not to think of Seanan McGuire's *Indexing*, but that's just because these are fairytales, after all.)

heidi says

It's really difficult for me to review short story anthologies, because I am TERRIBLE at stopping and letting one story rest and germinate a review in my head before I start the next one. It's like... did you know that many books have CHAPTER BREAKS, where average mortals STOP READING AND GO TO SLEEP?

That is also not my strongest concept.

So instead the stories all end up happening in the same world for me, even when they obviously aren't. Oops. But happily, because this book had a folk-tale theme, at least it worked out ok for me. Maybe I'll do it like a middle school awards assembly?

Creepiest goes to The Wolf and the Woodsman, for a really excellent and bone-chilling depiction of stalking.

Never gets the award for Most Heartbreaking because there's no way out.

Boar and Apples wins for Most Satisfying. It has everything I didn't know I wanted, including a charming pun as a central premise.

Bluebeard's Wife gets Most Wistful, for depictions of just wanting a little respect and privacy.

Loathly was in the running for Most Wistful, but will have to settle for Most Misandrist. In a good way. Magic is terrible, kids.

As for the poetry, I think that poetry is arrows shot at a smaller mark than prose, but I really enjoyed Bait for the way it required reading through and then listening to. Poetry, man. It's wicked hard.

Vernon's writing style is wry, and detached, and observational. It keeps a lot of things from becoming overly sentimental. And once in a while she hits a turn of phrase that makes me wish more people could do what she does.

~He had apparently been a very evil man, but not actually a bad one.~

And sometimes it's so funny and true that you can't help but sort of huff out a laugh.

~(I wish I could do salamanders. I would read Clive Barker novels aloud and seed the streams with efts and hellbenders. I would fly to Mexico and read love poems in another language to restore the axolotl. Alas, it's frogs and toads and nothing more. We make do.) ~

(Clive Barker WOULD produce salamanders. Then I had to think about what amphibians other writers would produce. Imagine the sad little mudskippers you'd get from reading Clive Cussler instead.)

~(The seamstress had always had a great desire to sew something with puffed sleeves, and the fact that Snow stared at them with great astonishment and mild indignation did nothing to diminish her moment of glory.) ~
AHAHAHAHA PUFFED SLEEVES.

Read if: You, too, grew up on retold fairy tales and Anne of Green Gables. And if you like people who keep their authorial wits about them instead of getting carried away.

Skip if: You are a nice earnest person who will not appreciate realizing that this whole beautiful story was probably born as a late-night pun.

Also read: Seas of Venus, for a MASTERFUL construction of an entire novella leading to a TERRIBLE pun. And, um, The Girls of the Kingfisher Club for another narrator not afraid to let you know she's there.

Oh! And Jane Yolen's Sleeping Ugly. You should certainly read that, too. Yup.

Miss says

what a lovely collection

this is a set of adult fairy tale retellings wherein adult means thoughtful and complicated rather than HBO style 'just add sex and blood!!!!' adult

i read them all in one long bus ride so i don't have much to say about individual stories per se but as a whole i found them very down-to-earth and sympathetic to their characters. also this has what is maybe my favourite bluebeard retelling? possibly because most bluebeard retellings i've seen follow in the tradition of angela carter and are heavy on the ~aesthetic~ and vernon is more into sensible protagonists and using the story to think about privacy

4 stars

Lois Bujold says

I'd read the title story from this author (aka Ursula Vernon, for her kids' books) some time ago online, and it made an indelible impression. It sets a high bar for its companion stories to get over, but they stand up well even in comparison, especially "Never" and "Boar and Apples".

Especially "Never". Oh my yes. On so many levels.

Mode/subgenre is fairy tales retold for 21st C. grownups of all ages, interrogating the text with a lot of skiffy-minded logical questions, sometimes hilarious, sometimes heartbreaking.

Underpriced for the value, frankly. Highly recommended.

Ta, L.

Later: Also read *Nine Goblins*. Great fun mainly for the protags, especially the elvish veterinarian, although the goblin sergeant runs him a close second. A gruesome bit toward the end. But a fascinating take on wizards. And an appreciation of the exhaustion of responsibility that must have come from real-life experience, in whatever form.

Ta, L.

Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

Final review, first posted on Fantasy Literature:

T. Kingfisher is the name used by author Ursula Vernon for her adult fiction, although some of her T. Kingfisher works fall into the young adult category, like *The Seventh Bride*, and some of her Ursula Vernon works are adult works, like her wonderful Nebula award-winning short story *Jackalope Wives*. Regardless of the name she uses, I've been searching out her fiction ever since reading "Jackalope Wives." T. Kingfisher writes lovely fairy tale retellings and other folk and fairy tale-flavored fantasies, usually with a twist,

sometimes dark and disturbing, always thoughtful.

In *Toad Words and Other Stories*, T. Kingfisher has collected many of her folk and fairy tale-based short stories. This collection includes eight stories based off of old tales such as “Toads and Diamonds,” “The Little Mermaid,” “Peter Pan,” and others, including one that was entirely new to me, the “Loathly Lady.” Three short original poems, also fairy-tale themed, are included in this collection.

The title story, “Toad Words,” is a very brief tale in which the sister who was cursed to have amphibians fall from her lips every time she speaks (the result of speaking rudely to a fairy), tells how she unexpectedly discovered some hidden benefits of her curse.

“You’ll grow into it,” the fairy godmother said. “Some curses have cloth-of-gold linings.” She considered this, and her finger drifted to her lower lip, the way it did when she was forgetting things. “Mind you, some curses just grind you down and leave you broken. Some blessings do that too, though.”

“Toad Words” is a short but impactful tale that will particularly resonate with readers who are concerned about endangered species.

“The Wolf and the Woodsman” is a twisted version of “Little Red Riding Hood,” where a girl named Turtle ? who actually doesn’t wear a hood of any color, let alone red (“that was added later because it alliterated”) ? helps her grandmother and a kindly wolf take care of a problem with an overly familiar woodsman. Though the story veers away from the classic tale, there are several humorous callbacks to some of the time-honored lines in the original.

“Bluebeard’s Wife” is perhaps not so much a twisted tale as it is an alternative point of view. Althea, Bluebeard’s wife, grew up with extremely annoying busybody sisters. As a result, Althea has a deep-seated antipathy toward people who pry into other’s business. So when her husband gives her a small golden key and tells her never to open the door at the top of the tower, she really has no interest in opening that mysterious door. I’ve reviewed this story separately here .

“Loathly” is based on the medieval “Loathly Lady” stories, which now have fallen into obscurity, but are based on the motif of a woman who is enchanted to appear physically repulsive, and is transformed into a beauty when a man desires her in spite of initial ugliness. In this story, Kingfisher takes a very dark (and adult) view of the woman’s enchantment, which forces her to make untenable demands of traveling knights, and kill them when they refuse to comply ... and of the way that various knights react to the situation, as well as the woman herself. It is a grim and rather gruesome tale, but also a poignant one.

“The Sea Witch Sets the Record Straight” is another brief, amusing twist on the classic tale. Ursula, the sea witch, explains that she really didn’t want the mermaid’s voice for herself, but took it to protect the secret of their underwater society:

No, I took her voice for two simple reasons ? she was a twit and she was in love. I took one look at her and knew that she’d spill everything she knew in that pretty human boy’s ear, and then where would we be?

So Ursula gives the mermaid’s voice to an albatross who has ambitions of being an opera star. It’s not her fault that the prince isn’t really interested in an odd mute girl who’s rather ditzy, however beautiful!

“Never” is another very dark story, based on the Peter Pan tale. The Lost Boys and the occasional girl stolen by Pan to live with him in Neverland actually lead a wretched existence. There are reasons no one ever gets old in Neverland. It’s a disturbing and melancholy tale, with a few haunting revelations, and one of the most

memorable stories in this collection.

“Night” is a one-page vignette about the cast members who put on the eternal show of starry nights, eon after eon, for very slowly evolving life forms. It’s an imaginative and humorous tale, so brief that it’s not particularly notable, but it makes a nice amuse-bouche preceding the final tale in this collection.

Boar & Apples, my favorite in this collection, is a novella-length retelling of “Snow White,” in which Snow hangs out with seven talking boars and feral pigs, rather than dwarves. I loved that twist, along with a few others in this novella. Snow is a very pale, generally biddable girl with a stubborn streak. Her mother, the queen, is a cruel woman with no love at all for others, including her own child.

The queen’s witchblood came from an ancestor many years removed, who had loved a troll and been loved in return with little thought for the consequences ... The queen’s blood ran hot and cold, and when she had found the mirror, she had no thought but to use it. The demon did not have to seduce her with words or visions; she came essentially pre-seduced. This offended the demon’s notion of its own craftsmanship, but it did save time.

When the neglected Snow turns seventeen, the demon in the mirror tells the now-aging queen that Snow is fairer than her ? mostly just to stir up trouble. The queen orders the huntsman to kill Snow; he takes her far from the castle, where they run into a group of wild hogs that are interested in having a human stay with them and help them with their needs (preparing meals and helping them sell the truffles they gather). The hogs have distinct and often amusing personalities. And Snow slowly comes to “the end of what being quiet and biddable could do for her” ... which is a very good thing, once the queen is finally told the truth by the gleeful mirror.

I love Kingfisher’s voice in these tales ? they’re filled with dry humor and whimsical details that make reading them a delight, and they’re often quite insightful about human nature and life. If you’re a fan of fairy tale retellings, this collection shouldn’t be missed, especially since it’s only \$3.99 for the ebook. Several of the short stories in this collection are available to read free online; Kingfisher generously lists her online short fiction here on her website, including more that aren’t included in this *Toad Words and Other Stories* collection.

I received a free copy of this ebook from the author in exchange for a review. Thank you!

Tasha Robinson says

So good to have so many of Ursula Vernon's smart, down-to-earth, slyly funny fables in one place, and with a new novella (casting the seven dwarves as intelligent, principled boars!) to boot. I haven't seen rewrites of the familiar fairy tales this interesting and creative since Tanith Lee's *Red As Blood*.

Emma says

This was a collection of short stories based on different POV in certain fairy tales. They were clever and amusing and lovely to dip in to.

Carl says

I totally didn't cry at "Boar & Apples" and I'm not tearing up now thinking about it.

So there.

Very highly recommended.

Jasmine says

This is an ASTONISHINGLY good set of fairy tale and modern-mythos retellings. Funny, bloody, serious, heartbreaking. One of the hallmarks of T. Kingfisher's work (including writing as Ursula Vernon) is a kind of very sensible, now-what-do-we-do-about-this mindset, and it runs through all the stories and poems here. Her heros and heroines never take too much time googling about the situation. It is what it is, I speak toads into existence/peter pan is always surrounded by children and I'm growing up/the queen my mother wants to kill me, so now what should I DO about that? What's the sensible thing to do here? This is very calming to read about, and is wonderfully juxtaposed with the absurdity of fantasy fiction. Of course, sometimes that means calmly staring into your oncoming death as much as it means you sometimes calmly finding a way out of the situation by bartering truffles with peddlers, which is why I read this in very small bites and occasionally forgot I had it on the go. (oops.)

But yeah, astonishingly good and should be taught in classrooms studying fairytales and retellings.

Marquise says

T. Kingfisher is quickly becoming one of my favourite Fantasists merely because of how much I've enjoyed her fairy tale retellings, all of them so lovely, whimsical and that always manage to elicit a smile. She's so imaginative and at times irreverent, but always delivers it with a good dose of humour.

This anthology wasn't different from expected, if shorter than normal. It contains 11 short stories that retell classic fairy tales and one Arthurian-style legend. Not all of the retellings are short stories, three of them are poems, but all do take inspiration from a tale or legend. For me, the best ones were "The Wolf and the Woodsman" (A *Little Red Riding Hood* remake with a twist: Red isn't as oblivious as she is usually painted), "Loathly" (the one knightly tale with a rather dark twist; it's a sort of *Sir Gawain and the Loathly Lady* retelling from the perspective of the Loathly Lady. Tragic story.), and "The Sea Witch Sets the Record Straight" (*The Little Mermaid* from Ursula's point of view, comical all round).

Jen says

Yes. Get this book. It's a charming and delightful collection of short stories and poems, mostly retellings of classic fairy tales. Get this. It's well worth it.

K.J. Charles says

I glommed an absurd amount of T Kingfisher on my holidays, basically consuming her entire adult backlist, and I regret nothing except that there aren't more. This is a delightful collection of stories, as imaginative and elegantly written and readable as one would expect from this author. I find her combination of humour, sharp insight and kind-heartedness incredibly soothing to my soul.

Tiakall says

I'm a fan of twists on fairy tales, so this became my first purchase of this author. Overall, this is a good collection of subversions and retellings that explore the fairy tale world and tropes without necessarily being fairy tales themselves.

Individual stories:

"It Has Come To My Attention": Was surprised to see poetry in a short story collection. Poetry isn't really my thing, so it took me a couple of reads to understand what was going on, but once I did, its punchline made me smile.

"Toad Words": A take on Diamonds and Toads. Why are my favorites always the first story? Great subversion, using the POV of the toad-spitting daughter.

"The Wolf and the Woodsman": A take on Little Red Riding Hood. It mostly follows overall structure - all the subversions are in the details (for example, who would dye a child's hood red?) Strong, enjoyable characters (and the name/nickname "Turtle" is adorable.)

"Bluebeard's Wife": I wasn't familiar with the Bluebeard fairy tale, but this was a pleasant read even without the background info. This story in particular highlights the author's ability to humanize the "villains" of various fairy tales.

"Loathly": Based off a trope called "Loathly lady". this is one where I think some basic familiarity with the trope helps the reader appreciate the story more. It takes a little while for this one to get going, but the ending is satisfyingly appropriate. This one has a warning at the front for "hard, ugly things, including sexual assault": (view spoiler)

"The Sea Witch Sets The Record Straight": A Little Mermaid take. Like the story before it, it meanders a bit in its subversion (though the (view spoiler)) but it's another satisfying ending.

"Never": A Peter Pan take. Wow, this one's kind of dark.

"Bait": Another poem. Again, poetry isn't really my thing, but I liked the punchline. Would've liked a prose version of this one.

"Night": Here, the subversion is (view spoiler) How fun! This one makes me smile.

"Boar and Apples": A Snow White take. This one feels similar to The Wolf and the Woodsman in that the story structure is similar and the subversions are in the details. I really liked the titular boars, as well as the expanding of the huntsman's role. I also appreciated that (view spoiler). The ending prompts one of my favorite lines in the whole work: (view spoiler).

"Odd Season": The last poem. This one didn't really do it for me.

In the introduction, the author confesses initially being worried that no one would actually pay for their short story collection because writing short stories wasn't something they did. Hopefully by now, those fears have been assuaged, since I not only bought this but will buy the next one as well.

Tl;dr: A solid, satisfying set of subversions.
