

THE ORIGIN STORIES SERIES



Desperately Seeking Feminist, Flawed, and Fabulous Characters

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I was a precocious tween who devoured superhero comics and fantasy novels when my mother gave me *Best-Loved Folk Tales of the World*. Printed in the tiniest imaginable font, *Best-Loved* was an 800-plus-page tome of stories selected by Joanna Cole (author of the *Magic School Bus* series). Every tale was an adventure, with wily talking animals (Puss in Boots), tricksters (Anansi the spider), unlikely heroes (Jack and the Beanstalk), and scary villains (the Big Bad Wolf). Some of them had happy endings, some left me in a state of ambivalence, and others were downright horrifying.

In particular, the Ancient Greek stories fascinated me—probably because of the connection to Wonder Woman's Amazonian ancestry—so I began to library-hop, searching for more retellings. Powerful magic, great trials, and evil doers getting their comeuppance are eternally exciting themes. I imagined the characters in other scenarios. What would happen if Aphrodite became a high school teacher? What if the goddess of the harvest's daughter Persephone gained her own super powers when she ate those pomegranate seeds in the land of the dead?

Having feminist parents who restricted my consumption of popular culture, I was (and still am) interested in the way social prejudices result in skewed interpretations and stereotypes, like the ones that appear in Disney interpretations. Why are all the princesses rail thin? Girls don't need to be tiny, beautiful, and chaste to be worthy of saving! Would anyone locked in a tower just wait around for some handsome prince to save her? Why would a girl marry the first guy to kiss her? And why are all witches nasty old women with warts and green hair?

Trickster tales, I eventually decided, were the most interesting and surprising. Since my mother's ancestors were Russian Jewish and German, I also paid special attention to Slavic and German tales. When I found Baba Yaga, I was captivated. In one story, she had three horsemen helpers who were responsible for changing day into night. In another, she was a cannibal with a taste for children and a disembodied hand that did her bidding. Her house was built on chicken legs so it could turn away from anyone she didn't like. Then there were the stories where she actually helped people, because she deemed them brave, smart, and honest.

For *The Other Path*, I decided to interpret an intergenerational story about Baba Yaga and a desperate young woman, Vassalisa, who seeks her out because she has no other options. I've written a number of young adult novels (probably because my teen years were rough) and usually reframe situations I experienced so that my characters make different choices. Still, my teen girl characters exist on the same razor's edge I did, which means that one wrong choice can change everything. In "The Witch's Circle," teenage Lisa and her best friend Manda are vulnerable youth living in a suburban group home. They turn to the sorceress in the woods because there are no trustworthy adults in their lives.

The three characters at the centre of the story are all woman-identified. My grandmother Judith inspired this version of Baba: brilliant, proclamatory, mercurial, larger-than-life. Judith was the one who inspired my love of comics, decades ago, by taking me to a store at Bathurst and Bloor in Toronto called Captain George and the Whiz Bang Kids. It no longer exists, but my memories of it and Captain George are pivotal. I spent my allowance money on any books with girls on the cover.

Lisa and Manda are inspired by teens in the neighbourhood where I grew up. For two decades, I led writing workshops for youth, and the resilience, loyalty, and creativity of the young writers changed my life. So Lisa and Manda are courageous, brave, and love each other like sisters.

When I was thinking about a setting, I kept returning to my memories of a secret spot deep in the forests of High Park, which kids from my high school called "the witch's circle." We met up there on weekends to make a bonfire, smoke weed, drink, and tell ghost stories. That area has since disappeared. Over the decades, it has been de-wilded, overly cultivated, and re-wilded. High Park looks very different than it did in the nineties. So I moved the witch's circle to a park in Rexdale, Ontario that still has deeply forested areas.

Even post-#MeToo, it's rare to find older women characters like Baba. In this story, I wanted her to live by a strict moral code, wanted her to claim her power, and follow through on her promises. Listeners have to imagine what she looks like, but I see her as beautiful. Too often, to get what we want, women-identified folks still have to smile when they're angry, compromise on their needs, tone down their speech, and make themselves small. Not Baba. She's wild, bombastic, and ferocious. She connects with and channels the forces of nature—wind, plants, fire—which are larger than humans, awe-inspiring, heartbreakingly beautiful, and often result in tragedy. Mother Nature giveth and taketh away. In Baba, Lisa and Manda have found a flawed role model.