

*Beautiful Darkness***Fabien Vehlmann and Kerascoët; Trans. Helge Dascher**

Daniel Pietersen, Independent Scholar

Montreal, Quebec: Drawn and Quarterly, 2018.

ISBN: 978-1770463363 (paperback), 112pp, \$121.20

Once upon a time there was a queen whose wisdom and knowledge made her beloved by all of her subjects. She would sit with them by their hearths, telling stories that warned of the world's dangers. Most of her people listened intently, learning to not stray from the forest path and how to ignore the night's quiet voices. Some, however, would not listen to the queen's warnings and their fates became woven into her stories. That queen was called Fairy Tale and she is the grandmother of Folk Horror...

Fairy tales may now be seen as more fanciful, more happily-ever-after than the darker realms of folk horror, especially after the sanitising effects of storytellers like Disney, but the lineage becomes clear when we consider the original purpose of fairy stories; to warn, to educate and, often, to frighten into obedience. Folk horror, even when it veers more into speculative fiction or pure horror, trawls this repository for inspiration and then weaves its own concerns, using older stories to talk about more modern horrors, into the well-worn threads of fairy tales.

The creators of *Beautiful Darkness* (*Jolies Ténèbres* in the original French) fully understand this interweaving. By combining modern graphic novel design with picture book simplicity and the primary colours of fairy folk with the darker shadows of emotional and physical abuse, the work of writer Fabien Vehlmann and artist Kerascoët (actually the pen

name of Marie Pommepeuy and Sébastien Cosset) becomes something quite astonishing; a piece of true folk horror that does not just link the past and the present, but becomes both simultaneously.

Beautiful Darkness opens with a girl, who we will later know as Aurora, waiting nervously for the arrival of Hector, a prince that Aurora impressed at a recent ball. They take tea but, as romance starts to blossom, the room melts into a nightmarishly organic mess. Aurora escapes into darkness and rain and a full-page spread shows us that the home she has fled from is actually the body of a young girl. Lying lifelessly on the overgrown floor of a night-time forest the girl has started to decay, forcing both Aurora and a crowd of other tiny folk to flee into the storm. All this in the book's first six pages and from here on the book charts how Aurora's people fall victim either to the forest's natural dangers or the more insidious perils of factionalism, betrayal and spite. We also see how Aurora herself, initially naive and eager-to-please, is ground down into a fine, sharp edge.

Like the best fairy tales, *Beautiful Darkness* works on multiple levels. It can be read simply as a tale of woodland folk pushed out of their depth once their home becomes uninhabitable, but there is a darker, more subtle interpretation. Aurora is not just the name of the book's miniature protagonist but is also the name written on a school notepad that the tiny folk use as a shelter. Given its size this must have belonged to the now-dead girl. Are the full-sized and miniature Auroras linked? Tiny Aurora's emotional, terrified reaction to one of the flies that is infesting full-sized Aurora with maggots seems to indicate that they are. If so, does this mean that the other characters in the group of tiny people – manipulative Zelie, capricious Plim, angst-ridden Timothy, intrepid Jane – are also fragments of the dead child's consciousness? Why, then, do they appear to be initially ignorant of each other's identity and, largely, unconcerned about each other's well-being? Why do they slowly turn on each other? It is because that is what we, as humans, do. We turn on others of our kind because of minor

differences or perceived inferiorities and, all too often, we turn on ourselves by succumbing to our less-palatable emotions; doubt, jealousy, ignorance.

The book's art also blends the immediate and the hidden. On face value it is a quite beautiful work of watercolour on ink that would suit any small child's picture book, but there are subtleties beyond this initial layer. Firstly, large parts of the story are told through the art rather than through the character's speech and actions. Interstitial panels flesh out the lives, and deaths, of less prominent but still important characters and the background of larger panels thrives with detail; Hector's persistent and apparently arbitrary wooing of various female characters, for example, or the slow decay of full-sized Aurora. Secondly, each character is drawn to a different level of accuracy depending on their 'nearness' to the real-world. Full-size Aurora and The Giant, an otherwise unnamed male human, are presented in a realistic manner. Jane, the most resourceful and worldly of the tiny people maintains a level of realism but marks a move into cartoon proportions that then intensify as we move down through Aurora, Zelig and into the supporting cast of the more (sometimes quite literally) sketched-in characters. It could well be simply that the less important characters have had less time spent on them, but I feel it is a deliberate way of telling us that they are less well-formed, less mature aspects of full-sized Aurora's nascent personality.

It is tempting to break *Beautiful Darkness* down into component parts – a post-millennial *Moomins*, perhaps, or *The Lord of the Flies* as an early Studio Ghibli animation – but it is not component parts. It is an outstanding, haunting piece of work that seamlessly blends its narrative and art, and the histories of those two media, into a flawless whole.