Robin **Mara**

Briar Rose:

Jane Yolen's Magic Touch Revealed

If you ask me,
I would have to say
all the world's magic
comes directly from the mouth. (15-18)
—(from the poem "'Once Upon a Time,' She Said" by Jane Yolen)

As we grow older and supposedly wiser, most of us put away fairy tales and folklore as if they were merely childish things. But contemporary sages such as Joseph Campbell and Jane Yolen urge us to reclaim our birthright to this deep-rooted genre for our children and ourselves. Far more than fanciful stories to dream on, fairy tales and folklore are the primal language for communicating fundamental beliefs from one generation to the next throughout the centuries.

Dubbed "America's Hans Christian Anderson" by many, Yolen speaks authoritatively about humanity's basic need for fairy tales, fantasy, and folklore, and she contributes voluminously to that body of work. In her 1981 book of essays *Touch Magic—Fantasy, Faerie and Folklore in the Literature of Childhood* (updated in 2000), Yolen elucidated the vital functions and attributes of fairy tales and lore. Here we explore her haunting, modern-day, holocaust novel *Briar Rose* (1992), revealing it as the full-bodied incarnation of her insights regarding the elements of a true fairy tale, which she so artfully argued in *Touch Magic*. (An American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults, *Briar Rose* was originally published for adults but has become a popular young adult book selection.)

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In *Briar Rose*, a mysterious, fractured account of the Sleeping Beauty tale is entwined with a riveting, classic search for identity amidst the historic horror of a Nazi extermination camp. Fulfilling a deathbed promise, a compassionate young woman embarks on her personal quest to exhume the cryptic past of her beloved, eccentric grandmother who steadfastly clung to the belief that she was the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood, Briar Rose. The story of Becca's search is compelling on its own, and the strangely disturbing fairy tale that her grandmother

compulsively recreated—both lovingly and sometimes fiendishly—over the years, informs us that this story is dark and perhaps treacherous. The tale calls Becca (and the reader) to explore its depths and find herself among the shadows. The reader "hears" Gemma's tale in flashbacks, presented in pendulum-like fashion, in alternating chapters of *Briar Rose*. The story swings back and forth in time, recounting the stories Becca heard as a child and in turns moving to the adult Becca's story. This to and fro pulsation sets up the reader for seismic shifts of the heart and mind to come. In perfect counterpoint, each revelation of the tale is followed by a chapter in which Becca uncovers clues that painstakingly unlock Gemma's past and support her outlandish story. In each chapter pair, deeper renderings of Gemma's tale and her past emerge.

In *Touch Magic*, Yolen opens with a call for every child to be steeped in the traditions of myth, legends, and folklore, pronouncing it a "birthright." She contends that children have an inherent developmental need for these stories, which serve four critical functions in the education of every child. First, they "provide a landscape of allusion" by which children will begin to recognize archetypes and patterns that they must understand. The second function these stories serve is to help children view another culture "from the inside out" and understand that stories and cultures build on the stories and cultures that preceded them. Yolen says, "This is mythic archaeology, probing now for then, splitting the present to find the past. It works because humans have always had, in folklorist Joseph Campbell's fine phrase, 'a long backward reach'" (17). Thirdly, symbolic functions serve as a useful therapy tool (as promoted by Bruno Bettelheim), helping individuals understand the human experience and themselves. Yolen introduces the fourth function as the most important: "The great archetypal stories provide a framework or model for an individual's belief system. [. . .] The tales and stories handed down to us from the cultures that preceded us were their most serious, succinct expressions of the accumulated wisdom of those cultures" (18). It is wisdom perfected and distilled as it looped through the centuries and became expressed unconsciously as metaphor.

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Yolen's *Briar Rose* exemplifies all these functions. It is a story that cultivates awareness of the elemental archetypes and allegories without requiring the vocabulary. As a child, Becca certainly was endowed with her "birthright" and steeped in story. Both Becca and *Briar Rose* readers experience all four functions within Gemma's tale and Becca's own story. Yolen paints a full "landscape of allusion" packed with archetypes, symbols and pattern, some quickly recognizable and others whose meanings surface only later, perhaps with a sudden shock of awareness. Becca's quest leads her from her home in Massachusetts to the remains of a castle in Poland. This is mythic archaeology at its finest—"probing now for then," as Yolen says, and then for now. This section of the story is set near Chelmno, Poland, the actual site of a former castle-turned-extermination camp. It was here that a youthful Gemma was gassed and dumped into a mass grave. In Chelmno, Becca meets the hero Josef (an allusion to Joseph Campbell?) whose memories inform her and provide that "long backward reach" to solve the mystery and resuscitate Gemma's long-smothered story. It was this same Josef Potocki, a man of princely lineage, called Prince by his band of partisans in the woods, who breathed life back into the cursed, 16-year-old, "sleeping" princess—Gemma.

Briar Rose also clearly extols the third function: the therapeutic merits of fairy tales. It was the Sleeping Beauty tale that gave Gemma an identity when gassing by the Nazis seized her mind and her memory; Gemma's tale was an effective, repressive tool to hold back the demons, allowing her to leave her horrors behind and start anew. Readers also witness the therapeutic nature of the sharing of the story and the satisfaction of the quest as these vehicles deliver Becca—helping her grieve Gemma's death and discover her own identity, as well as her grandmother's. (Becca's editor and advisor Stan also reveals his need for shared story while divulging his own cloaked lineage.)

However, it is the fourth and most important function that Yolen discusses at length throughout

several essays in *Touch Magic*: fairy tales and lore as the distillate of the passed-down stories, crystallized into a framework for living, expressed unconsciously through metaphor. And metaphor is the language, the heart, of *Briar Rose*.

In her essay "The Lively Fossil" (in Part One of *Touch Magic*) Yolen explains, "The old stories had a habit of changing as they passed from one tongue to another, kept alive by some sort of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation" (21), and later, "From mouth to ear to mouth, the old tales went. It was a generational art, a regenerational art, passed on and on" (22). These images are the core of *Briar Rose*. Like storytellers before her, Gemma changed the tale to suit her purpose. Becca's two older sisters came to resist the strangeness of Gemma's story, as did many others, not wanting to recognize its shadows. But Becca—the classic, good, fairytale protagonist—listened with her heart and was compelled to probe the story's depths and pass it on in her own way, "from mouth to ear to mouth" (a phrase that appears repeatedly throughout *Briar Rose* and much of Yolen's other work). One can't help but see the parallel structure of Yolen's words in *Touch Magic* "from its misty origins to the contemporary rendition" as they relate to *Briar Rose*. Gemma's story was clouded in mist; it was frequently observed and integral to her tale; only later do we realize that the mist was the Nazi gas. And, this story of Briar Rose is certainly "the contemporary rendition." Particularly recognizable in *Briar Rose* is that image of "mouth-to-mouth resuscitation" as Josef awakens the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood. Furthermore, we can see this story was changed by the culture—the atrocities and the legacy of the Nazis as the powerful "erosion/eruption."

Yolen explores this passage of story in *Touch Magic*, "The best of the old stories spoke to the listener because they spoke not just to the ears but to the heart as well" (25). This motif presents itself in Becca—she who listened with her heart was the one who truly heard. (It is also true for this reader; this is a story whose images and symbols reappeared frequently in dreams and periods of near-wakefulness, sometimes gently and other times jarringly, spawning its wisdom.) Yolen says:

> Storytelling is our oldest form of remembering the promises we have made to one another and to our various gods, and the promises given in return; it is a way of recording our human emotions and desires and taboos. [. . .]
>
> Further, the best new stories have something serious to say about the writer and his or her particular world. All writers write about themselves, just as the old storytellers chose to tell stories that spoke to and about themselves. They call it the world, but it is themselves they portray. The world of which they write is like a mirror that reflects the inside of their hearts, often more truly than they know. (25-26)

Gemma's life ends, and Becca's quest begins with an outright promise. The fulfillment of the promise in effect does record the emotions, desires, and taboos—Gemma's, Becca's, our culture's, and Yolen's, too, particularly as they relate to the Holocaust. Toward her closing of "The Lively Fossil," Yolen quotes G. K. Chesterton, "If you really read the fairy tales, you will observe that one idea runs from one end of them to the other – the idea that peace and happiness can only exist on some condition. This idea, which is the core of ethics, is the core of the nursery tale" (27). This is certainly the core of *Briar Rose* (though it is hardly a nursery tale): Peace cannot exist until the dark shadows have been exposed and stripped of their power.

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In her *Touch Magic* essay "Once Upon A Time," Yolen recounts the wolf and Red Riding Hood's ritual litany of "Oh, Grandmother, what big ears you have . . ." and describes the listening child's realization that "Something else, something sinister, is lurking under the bedclothes" (32). Readers observe Becca occasionally feeling that startling recognition as her grandmother spins her twisted Sleeping Beauty tale. Something is palpably wrong and frightening in her grandmother's words. Yolen continues in "Once Upon A Time:" "But to filter out the opacities for the child

reader is to rob the tale of its magic. And this is a loss for the adult reader, too. If a story is totally transparent, it has no interest beyond that first reading or hearing" (36). Gemma certainly did not shield her young listeners from the shadows—although she never fully revealed their nature (to her listeners or herself)—and that was the pull that kept Becca wanting more. Yolen reminds us in *Touch Magic*:

> Look back into folklore and legend, myth and religion, and you will find much of the emphasis is on the shadow. A shadowless man is a monster, a devil, a thing of evil. A man without a shadow is soulless. A shadow without a man is a pitiable shred. Yet together, light and dark, they make a whole. And these light/dark chiaroscuro figures walking about a magical landscape illumine all our lives. (36)

As does Gemma illumine ours. Yolen revisits and expounds on this theme again in the essay "The Mask on the Lapel:"

> Every person's father is a dragon—and also a dragon slayer, the two eternal opposites. Only very special fathers have the ability to integrate the two sides, and only very special children can actually see that integration. Mother and stepmother, godmother and witch, hero and villain, over and over the contrapuntal dance goes on. And so the children in their turn become dragons—and dragon-slayers. (66-67)

It is clear that Becca is one of those rare children who can integrate the shadow and light and accept the dark side of her grandmother.

A reader of *Briar Rose* likely feels a flash of recognition upon reading the title of Chapter Four of *Touch Magic*, "The Eye and The Ear." Stronger flashes occur while reading Yolen's opening words: "Once upon a time, a long time ago, there was a child who loved to listen to stories. [. . .] We were there, all of us, caught up in the centrifugal force of the spinning story. And we would not be let go until the teller finished and the tale was done" (41-42). Here Yolen is describing herself as a young girl, and, interestingly, perfectly describing the child Becca, as well. Becca resembles Yolen herself to a great degree in her interests and background: residence in Hatfield, Massachusetts; education at Smith College; journalism work; reading preferences (Robin McKinley's *Beauty*); and Berlin family name; to list some of many commonalities. Yolen next proceeds to disclose the magic of the storyteller:

> Each storyteller has the ability to select [. . .] the glass mountain that must be climbed, the thorny bush that must be passed or the ring or sword or crown to be won. The storyteller is an artist, and selection is essential to art. There are thousands upon thousands of characters, thousands upon thousands of details, thousands upon thousands of motifs. To know which one to choose requires a kind of magical touch, and that is what characterizes the great storytellers. (46)

This description is an intimate portrait of Yolen herself, and also of Gemma, with the magical story she spun of mystery and metaphor. This passage calls to mind the careful collection of telling talismans Gemma left behind in the carved wooden box (graced with a rose and a briar) that would ultimately lead Becca to the truth. The details Yolen selected for that paragraph also spoke foretellingly of *Briar Rose* (which wasn't published for another 11 years): Becca's story opens with her chugging up a "slippery hill" (a glass mountain) in her trusty, little car to attend to—and ultimately rescue—Gemma, who lies dying, restrained on the uppermost floor of a nursing home in a corner room (like a princess imprisoned in the high turret of a castle); the thorny bush is the briar thicket surrounding the sleeping princess, as well as the barbed wire that punctuates the ironclad grip of Chelmno's walls; there is a man's ring of unknown origin bearing the initials JMP and date 1928; and there's a crown, too, although it is a figurative one, to be won.

Chelmno was a lesser-known Nazi camp, conceived solely for extermination, where 320,000 people were gassed in vans and dumped in mass graves. Only four men—no women—survived to tell of the terror there. In sharing this true story strengthened by allegory, Yolen shines glaring light on that dark evil, informing our culture.

Yolen continues in "The Eye and The Ear:" "Thus humans both shaped and were shaped by the oral tradition. The passage of culture went from mouth to ear to

mouth" (46). Gemma and Becca and those who hear Becca's story, *Briar Rose* readers included, are shaped by that story and are an integral part of the passage of culture "from mouth to ear to mouth." This is, in fact, true. Although Gemma is a fictitious character, Chelmno was real. Chelmno was a lesser-known Nazi camp, conceived solely for extermination, where 320,000 people were gassed in vans and dumped in mass graves. Only four men—no women—survived to tell of the terror there. In sharing this true story strengthened by allegory, Yolen shines glaring light on that dark evil, informing our culture.

Yolen further explains her craft in the fifth *Touch Magic* essay titled "Touch Magic:" "Using archetypes and symbolic language, they [fairy tales] externalize for the listener conflicts and situations that cannot be spoken of or explained or as yet analyzed. They give substance to dreams" (50). And she provides this caveat: "So when the modern mythmaker, the writer of literary fairy tales, dares to touch the old magic and try to make it work in new ways, it must be done with the surest of touches. [. . .] Unless the image, character, or situation borrowed speaks to the author's condition, as cryptically and oracularly as a dream, folklore is best left untapped" (51).

Perhaps this is why *Briar Rose* did not appear until 11 years after *Touch Magic*. One takes great risk in treating the ultimate human tragedy of the Holocaust in tandem with a fairy tale; magic is surely required to create such a ghastly treasure that will speak the truth for those who cannot or will not.

"The Mask on the Lapel," the following essay in *Touch Magic*, announces the great words of power that Yolen declares are largely absent from adult vocabularies: "Good. Evil. Courage. Honor. Truth. Hate. Love" (62). This is certainly the stuff of fairy tales. Yolen proclaims that "with these magical words, anything is possible: the transformation of human into beast, dead into living, night into day, year now into year then or year 3000" (62). Following this imagery, *Briar Rose* witnesses humans turned into Nazi beasts, humans treated as less than beasts, Gemma transformed from dead to living (literally and figuratively), a fairy tale transported into the far future, and the darkness in the vans of Chelmno brought to the light of day. *Briar Rose* conjures great acts of "Good. Evil. Courage. Honor. Truth. Hate. Love." Readers discover that little Becca's favorite part of Gemma's Sleeping Beauty tale is when the prince asks the duplicitous peasant, "But do you know courage?" (77) and the prince plunges himself into the thorns to free the princess, foreshadowing Becca's own courage in recovering her grandmother's past and rescuing her own future.

It is the chapter called "Tough Magic" in which connections to *Briar Rose* become crystal clear. Yolen states, "[. . .] it is not the expectation of a happy ending that carries us on. Rather it is the unraveling of the story itself; it is the traveling and not the destination" (71). In *Briar Rose*, when Stan warned Becca not to expect Gemma's story to have a happy ending, Becca said simply: "I won't. How happy can it be? Gemma's dead, after all" (94). This young woman was raised on a fairy tale that lacked the traditional happy ending; why would real life be more charmed? Becca never discovered her grandmother's inherited family name, so the bad fairy's curse on all who bore her name held fast; but, at the same time, Becca did reveal her grandmother's story as true, and that was enough. Yolen continues in this vein in "Tough Magic," discussing "the joy behind the shadow:"

> The same rule greets us in every age, in every mythology: without evil and the knowledge of its possible continuance, there can be no hope for redemption. This is what every memorable story, every tale of dimension is about: the working through evil in order to come at last to the light.
>
> [. . .] Stories of "Tough Magic" are never easy stories, nor should they be. As they call upon the possible sacrifice of hero or heroine, they ask a similar sacrifice on the reader's part: "Hold on," they cry out. "Delve deep," they call. "Dare to reach out and touch the face of the unknown." (72)

Gentle, sweet, determined Becca is the unlikely hero here—with the love, faith, honor and courage to confront the darkness when others will not. (Josef and Stan, too, have been down other roads as unlikely heroes.)

Yolen finally closes in on the subject of "Tough Magic" and her own need to light the darkness:

> It is important for children to have books that confront the evils and do not back away from them. Such books can provide a sense of good and evil, a moral reference point. If our fantasy books are not strong enough [. . .] then real stories, like those of Adolph Hitler's evil deeds, will seem like so much slanted news, not to be believed.
>
> Why do so many fantasies shy away from Tough Magic? [. . .] Because writing about Tough Magic takes courage on the author's part as well. To bring up all the dark, unknown, frightening images that live within each of us

> and to try to make some sense of them on the page is a task that takes courage indeed. It is not an impersonal courage. Only by taking great risks can the tale succeed. (73-74)

Is Yolen speaking of the courage that she must summon to make the journey she knows she must, to tell the true story of this horror and sufficiently endow it with allegory to give it the full power it deserves? Here in *Touch Magic* Yolen highlighted the framework for the powerful and true tale of *Briar Rose*. Yolen's first story about the Holocaust was a young adult novel, the critically acclaimed and multiple award-winning *The Devil's Arithmetic*, published in 1988. The research and writing for it took several years. After that emotionally wrenching writing endeavor, Yolen swore she would never write another Holocaust book. Fortunately, she had a convincing editor who persuaded her that this story of the Sleeping Beauty should be told. On her Internet homepage, Yolen says her idea for *Briar Rose* was inspired by the documentary program "Shoah," where she first learned about Chelmno: a concentration camp housed in a castle, surrounded by barbed wire, where people were gassed to death. The image of Sleeping Beauty came to her and would not let her go. And so it was Jane Yolen who resuscitated the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood in a form to speak deeply about our culture—its triumphs and its terrors.

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Yolen consummates *Touch Magic* (the 1981 edition) with these words:

> Knowing that, that magic has consequences, whether it is the magic of wonder, the magic of language, or the magic of challenging a waiting mind, then it is up to the artist, the writer, the storyteller to reach out and touch that awesome magic. Touch magic—and pass it on.
>
> It will be changed by that passage, of course. But so, in the passing, will we. And so, too, will our *listeners*, those who come after. (91)

And so the magical human story continues, as Yolen refrains: "From mouth to ear to mouth," fairy tales—penetratingly true—speak across the ages.

Robin Mattis Mara *is currently a graduate student in K-12 Reading Education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She was previously an elementary classroom teacher and a literacy teacher/tutor for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.*

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