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## Princess Not-So-Charming

A fairy tale for today's world

Arts



Photograph by Robert Adam Mayer

The writer at work: Soman Chainani in his Brooklyn apartment

by Susan Hodara  
May-June 2013

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“FAIRY TALES have always tapped into the subconscious, bringing to light children’s deepest fears,” says Soman Chainani ’01. In his new fantasy-adventure novel, *The School for Good and Evil*, he has brought that tenet into the twenty-first century.

The first of a trilogy for middle-grade readers (ages nine and up), *The School for Good and Evil* tracks two

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archetypal heroines: the lovely Sophie, with her waist-long blond hair and her dreams of becoming a princess, and her friend Agatha, an unattractive, unpopular contrarian who chooses to wear black. A giant bird snatches the pair and carries them off to the School for Good and Evil, a two-pronged magical academy that trains children to become fairy-tale heroes and villains. When, to her horror, Sophie arrives at the Evil branch to learn “uglification,” death curses, and other dark arts, while Agatha finds herself at the School for Good amid handsome princes and fair maidens, the line between good and evil blurs, the meaning of beauty twists, and the girls reveal their true natures.

KEYWORDS

Class of 2001, Maria Tatar



At the core of their journey is the “princess culture,” which Chainani defines as today’s “tyranny of pink in young-girl marketing. It tells them their responsibility is to be pink, sparkly, ultra-feminine, and—most of all—pretty.” With such an emphasis on looks, “girly girls are terrified of being ugly, and normal girls are afraid of being outcasts.” Even boys are unnerved. “They have no idea how to live up to the expectations,” he says. “That’s what I am interested in capturing: what kids fear most today.”

Sophie and Agatha inhabit a world like that of classic fairy tales: a place where magic and reality coexist, and dangers lurk. Yet those dangers reflect modern issues. Several episodes tackle the fear of aging; one chapter riffs on the current obsession with physical self-improvement. In a scene where Sophie is asked to contribute to the school, she becomes a campus celebrity by offering “Malevolent Makeovers” and a presentation titled “Just Say No to Drab.” When Agatha challenges her, Sophie replies, “Isn’t this compassion? Isn’t this kindness and wisdom? I’m helping those who can’t help themselves!”

“So much is based on image,” Chainani explains. “It’s such a pervasive, destructive thing.”

The fairy tales have roots in Chainani’s childhood in Key Biscayne, where he grew up in one of the island’s only Indian families. “I was Agatha,” he says. “I might have thought I was Sophie, but Agatha was who I really was.” He was devoted to Disney animations as well as to Roald Dahl’s stories (“I had a bit of a dark edge as a kid,” he says). As an adolescent, he listened to Madonna incessantly. By the time he arrived at Harvard, Chainani’s fascination with fairy tales—and with female villains in particular—was entrenched. “A female villain is infinitely more clever than a man,”

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he says. “Her evil relies not on brute violence, but on the ability to manipulate, seduce, or recruit—in sum, a deeper, more thrilling corruption.”

A freshman seminar on the literary culture of childhood taught by Loeb professor of Germanic languages and literatures **Maria Tatar**, chair of Harvard’s folklore and mythology program, enlivened Chainani’s first year. (Tatar became a mentor; commenting on *The School for Good and Evil*, she wrote, “It is not often that someone comes along who can reinvent fairy tales and reclaim their magic.”) Three years later, he wrote a senior English thesis about the reinvention of wicked women as fairy-tale villains. His academic efforts earned him a Hoopes Prize, the Le Baron Russell Briggs Commencement Prize, and a *summa cum laude* degree.

He went on to earn an M.F.A. from Columbia University’s film school and worked for a few years as a screenwriter for hire. Yet his concept for his own contemporary fairy tale never stopped tugging at him; he wrote it first as a film treatment. “It was going to be a movie,” he says. “I never thought it would be books.” Producer Jane Startz, however, saw it as a literary series—so he and Startz (whose feature films include *Tuck Everlasting* and *Ella Enchanted*) adapted the treatment into a proposal for a book trilogy. Within 72 hours, Startz had sold the books and optioned the movie rights herself. Chainani is currently writing the screenplay for *The School for Good and Evil*, along with the second and third installments of the novel (due out in 2014 and 2015, respectively).

The author considers his new book a modern-day fairy tale and a survival guide for children—boys as well as girls. “I think there is a bit of an urban legend that boys won’t read books that have female protagonists,” he says. “As they did with the original Grimm fairy tales, boys don’t respond to gender in a story—but simply to the circumstances that befall protagonists.”

Chainani draws parallels not only to the Grimm brothers’ works, but also to J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, which he greatly admires. “Her attention to magical details was unprecedented,” he says. “I preferred to spend more time on the kids.”

But he doesn’t wish to coddle his readers. “I don’t want my readers to feel safe,” he says. “I want to give them insight into different forms of good and evil.” Then he pauses. “Maybe my secret goal,” he says, “is to scare the pink princess out of a lot of little girls.”



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Audrey Kouyoumdjian · 10 months ago

Sounds fascinating Soman, I'm looking forward to reading it the book. Hopefully Pixar will pick it up :)

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