began to understand the universality of Hans Christian Andersen’s tales when I was retelling The Emperor’s New Clothes and my neighbor, a woman in her 30s from Taiwan, shouted out “Naked, he’s naked!” As we talked more about these stories, she nodded with familiarity yes, she knew the story of The Princess and the Pea, of course, of course she knew that the ugly duckling was a swan. She had only heard these tales in Chinese; she didn’t know that the author of these memorable stories was born in Denmark 200 years ago.

Real-life ugly duckling

So great is the genius of Hans Christian Andersen that his stories have the feeling of “always.” We have always known them. Yet, after I read three recently published biographies of Andersen, it became apparent that these now-classic tales came from his own life experiences. The story of that ugly duckling was his story; he was as sensitive as the princess who couldn’t sleep for feeling a minuscule pea through many mattresses.

Andersen was born April 2, 1805, in Odense, Denmark, to a poor cobbler father and washerwoman mother. As their only child, his parents indulged his fancies. His father read aloud plays and poetry and built him a puppet theater and his illiterate mother told folk tales as well as superstitious stories. His doting grandmother provided warm and open arms whenever needed. Yet, Andersen felt misplaced. He believed he was destined for greatness; he would be a great writer, an acclaimed poet, a person of renown. He would not be buried in penury in the provincial town where he was born.

Teachers will recognize and empathize with Hans Christian Andersen, the child – overly sensitive, nervous, a compulsive talker and a zealous writer who did not complete assigned work in favor of his own fixations. He was awkward amongst his peers, yet had a way of charming adults with his theatrical manner. His obsessive perseverance and blindness to social conventions held him in good stead; he survived years of hardship before finally obtaining sponsorship for his studies.

Revealing biographies

For an exquisitely seamless read-aloud picture book biography, look for The Perfect Wizard, Hans Christian Andersen by Jane Yolen, illustrated by Dennis continued on page 72
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Nolan (Dutton, 2005, ISBN: 0-525-46955-9). Yolen captures the essence of Andersen’s childhood, describing the one-room house, how his mother would impart information about “how crossing running water keeps you safe from trolls” and that his father would read aloud from The Arabian Nights. Yolen weaves passages from 21 of Andersen’s tales through the narrative, which aptly emphasizes how interlaced the events of his life were with his stories. Nolan’s illustrations present a soft, other-worldly feeling, providing full-page coverage of the salient events of Andersen’s life with small companion pieces depicting the events and characters from his imagination.

For a charming chapter-book biography, The Young Hans Christian Andersen by Karen Hesse (Scholastic, 2005, ISBN: 0-439-67990-7) has the size and warmth of an old-fashioned storybook. Newbery-winner Hesse tells Andersen’s life from birth to age 14, each chapter describing an essential life-affecting event. These moments are captured in delicate watercolor drawings by Erik Blegvad, who grew up in Copenhagen in the 1920s.

The most thorough of these biographies for children is Hans Christian Andersen: His Fairy Tale Life (Groundwood, 2005, ISBN: 0-888-99690-9), written by Hjordis Varmer, one of the most prolific and widely read children’s book authors in Denmark. This biography is the only one endorsed by the Hans Christian Andersen Bicentennial 2005 committee (www.hca2005.com). Lilian Brøgger’s humorous mixed-media illustrations provide a light counterpoint to the often miserable occurrences.

One interesting point made in this volume that’s not examined in the others is that the personification of objects was one of Andersen’s contributions to the fairy tale genre. He created toys that felt passion and a darning needle that yearned to be more. He was the first to use plain language and common vernacular instead of a more stilted flowery language that fairy tale writers typically used.

The previous title was translated from Danish by Tiina Nunnally, who has won numerous awards for her translations of Scandinavian fiction. The translator is important—the first translations of Andersen into English were done by someone who didn’t know Danish but thought Swedish was awfully close. As a result, Andersen’s unique sense of humor and interesting plot elements were literally lost in translation. The most obvious instance of this is that The Princess and the Pea should have read The Princess on the Pea.

Present-day relevance of HCA

Andersen’s tales are a wonderful catalyst for curriculum. Early elementary classes will enjoy hearing the The Ugly Duckling, which can spark a conversation about community building. I am often asked for materials to support discussions of peer pressure, and certainly The Emperor’s New Clothes would be a safe way to begin this conversation for third grade and above. Here are a few new editions to enjoy:

The Pea Blossom retold and illustrated by Amy Lowry Poole (Holiday House, 2005, ISBN: 0-823-41864-2). This story is a perfect example of Andersen's ability to endow inanimate objects with opinions and feeling. The author/illustrator resets the story of the five peas in China, with rich colors washing lightly over rice paper.

The Ugly Duckling illustrated by Robert Ingpen (Minedition, 2005, ISBN: 0-698-40010-0). The International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) presents The Hans Christian Andersen Awards every two years to a living author and an illustrator whose complete works have made a lasting contribution to children's literature. Ingpen, who received this award in 1986, has created richly textured paintings here, evoking a timeless place in nature.

The Wild Swans translated by Naomi Lewis (Barefoot Books, 2005, ISBN: 1-841-48164-5). Naomi Lewis is a distinguished writer, critic, poet and authority on children's literature in the UK. She is a particular expert on the writing of Hans Christian Andersen and has translated much of his work. In this transformation tale an evil stepmother turns 11 brothers into swans, and they are saved by their sister. Gilbert's colored pencil illustrations depict a luxuriant, romantic world.


Both the slew of new biographies and these newly rendered tales help us better understand Hans Christian Andersen and to introduce this fascinating writer and his work to our students.

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