Contemporary Fairy Lore and The Tooth Fairy: Structures to See Girlhood and Growing-Up in Parent-Child Relationships

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ABSTRACT

The use of supernatural narratives and folk beliefs reflect societal beliefs, desires, and fears. In Canada and the United States of America, one of the largest folk beliefs is the Tooth Fairy. This paper explores three phases of fairy representations: The folkloric fairy, the Victorian-era literary fairy, and the contemporary fairy. The contemporary fairy is grounded in auto-ethnographic reflections of familial folk fairy beliefs and early 2000s fairy representations. This paper describes fairy folk traditions like the Tooth Fairy as structures to help process fears of growing up too quickly for both the child and adults. Additionally, this paper views the shift of fairies in early 2000s media and literature as part of a broader capitalist and patriarchal narrative. Supernatural narratives of fairies currently act as a structured rite of passage and a model to young girls for their desired attitudes and roles as they grow up.

1. Introduction

Fairies have, and continue to be, socialized reflections of the culture they are embedded within. In contemporary Canada and the United States of America, many beliefs around fairies are received and popularized within media representations. In this essay, I will discuss literature on the folklore of fairies in comparison with completed auto-ethnographic research on my personal family fairy folklore. I will discuss three phases of fairies: 1) the folkloric fairies, including fairies as symbols of fear and femininity; 2) the shift in the Victorian era to create the domesticated and cute 'literary fairy'; before exploring 3) contemporary fairies including Disney Fairies and the Tooth Fairy as informed through my auto-ethnography. I argue that fairy beliefs, especially Tooth Fairy rituals, function as a structure to assist adults and children handling fears of growing up. Additionally, by critically analyzing the early 2000s North American representations of fairies I argue that fairies act as a role model to shape children—particularly young girls—to be subjects in a capitalist and patriarchal society.

2. Who Have Fairies Been

2.1 Folkloric Fairies

Much of this essay focuses on the contemporary monetized fairies, however, the intersection of girlhood and fairies invokes a discussion of folkloric femininity which is known for its darker, fear-based roots. The qualities associated with fairy folklore have significantly shifted over time, discussed in books and essays by Purkiss (2000), Silver (1999), and Magliocco (2019). These authors acknowledge the longstanding folkloric fairy, whose qualities imitated cultural fears as they changed over time. The roots of fairies originally reflect "our fear of what we do not know" (Purkiss 2019, 11). Reflection of societal fears is very common for folkloric supernatural creatures, and the original folkloric fairies are no exception. In Strange and Secret Peoples (1999) Carole Silver explores femininity in folk legends. She discusses that supernatural figures who were primarily portrayed as female were described as self-assertive and out of the control of men, disconnected from patriarchal society (Silver 1999, 175, 176). This was portrayed as a negative thing, often linked with Satanism. Silver (1999) evidences this by looking at legends of fairies, alongside witches, as two distinct creatures that were coded similarly as "the greatest threat to society" (176) and showed fears of "weakening of the patriarchal and hierarchical underpinnings of the church" (9). While this associated threat to society disappeared over time, the association between fairies and children grew. Originating in the belief that folkloric fairies stole children, fairies developed into a

beloved supernatural creature associated with promoting childhood and innocence.

2.2 The Victorian Shift to Literary Fairies

The literary descriptions of fairies, particularly seen in Victorian times, are sites of a major transform of fairies to create the contemporary 'literary fairy'. The transition towards a cute and harmless fairy—as it can be recognized in contemporary literature— can be traced back to the original folkloric projections of female supernatural beings. In contrast to the folkloric fairy, the literary fairy is a version of women that is "confined and domesticated" in order to subdue the qualities of women they fear (Silver 1999, 100). There is a process of "sweetening and simplifying fairies" at the same time as rendering them not simply small, but tiny (Purkiss 2000, 182). The miniature scale of fairies originally made them "manageable" and "laughable" which allowed the fairies of the literary lore to lose much of the malevolence, fear, and violence that was seen in the folkloric versions (Purkiss 2000, 182). The creation of tiny fairies is a product of literary representations compared to being a construct of folkloric practices (Silver 2000, 187). This process of domestication that fairies faced is a projection of how to deal with fears about women. Women can be turned cute and tiny—confined and domesticated—just as representations of fairies have been. Fairies have seemingly progressed away from this fearsome monster typical to folkloric representations and into gentle, tiny, winged playmates for children. In the Victorian era, the concept of childhood became a defined and recognized period of life; connecting children to fairies helps characterize the innocence, imagination, and playfulness associated with childhood. It was demanded for children to demonstrate this new necessary feature of childhood—imagination—by showing a belief in fairies (Purkiss 2000, 254). Fairies became a popular motif in children's toys, books, and theatre plays in the Victorian era rather than a manifestation of fears associated with femininity.

3. Fairies and Innocence as a Marker of Childhood

By correlating childhood with fairies, outgrowing a belief in the supernatural is a marker of outgrowing childhood itself and the subsequent loss of innocence. The Victorian "child as perfect innocent" (Purkiss 2000, 220) was further promoted in the rising "child-centred view of the family" popularized in post Second World War America (Purkiss 2000, 220; Tuleja 2012, 17). The period marked as childhood exists in a boundary between adulthood and infancy, an example of liminal space which the supernatural, including fairies, occupy. A child's innocence helps them enter this liminal space of supernatural fairy belief through their flexible, or weak, "boundaries between let's pretend and reality" (Purkiss 2000, 290). This innocence that fairies became strongly linked to then turns fairies into playmates that are "outgrown as children mature" and leave this innocence behind in maturation (Silver 1999, 118). As a specific example of this, discovering that the Tooth Fairy (or Santa Claus) isn't real is a rite of passage as much as participating in the belief and practices. The division of children and adults is reinforced in folkloric beliefs as "people lose the ability to see fairies as they become adults" (Magliocco 2019 paraphrasing J.M. Barrie, 117). In my family fairy folklore, children were the ones who believed in the fairies while guardian engagement fostered the belief and curiosity. The type of play my sister and I engaged in was ultimately inaccessible to adults because our innocence allowed for full immersion into the fantasy. Even without first-hand proof, it did not inhibit our faith that we were inhabiting the same landscape as fairies. The keepsakes that came out of participating in our belief system are artefacts that reflect a bygone childhood, one which can only be explored by adults vicariously through children.

4. Contemporary Fairies

4.1 The Tooth Fairy

The Tooth Fairy is one of the most widespread modern 'American' folk beliefs only second to Santa Claus (Tuleja 1991). Childhood is rapidly fleeting equally for those who are afraid to grow up and those excited to leave it behind. The Tooth Fairy as part of this period of growing up "marks a boundary between one stage of childhood and another" signified by the loss of baby teeth (Purkiss 2000, 315). The modern tooth fairy likely originates in European folk practices of giving lost teeth to animals including "crows, birds in general, and rodents" (Tuleja 1991, 16). Tuleja claims that the rise of accessible media sources including newspaper, television, and radio in the mid 1900s in America was critical for the Tooth Fairy to shift "from a relatively obscure folk belief into a national custom" (1991, 17). The role of the Tooth Fairy is to prioritize excitement in a potentially fearful experience where you have no control over the progression of change; you can not stop a tooth from falling out. The roles children and parents play in the ritual facilitated by the Tooth Fairy belief becomes a way to ease the period of transition.

4.2 My Family Fairy Folklore

As a child, my older sister and I had extensive folklore traditions in relation to fairies, especially present in relation to The Tooth Fairy. To set the scene, we were both incredibly creative, avid readers, and constructed complex systems in our play with toys. We had a particular affinity for fantasy which fuelled our attachment to fairy lore. The Tooth Fairy traditions that my sister and I engaged in included (1) putting a lost tooth in a small glass of water beside our bed so the fairy would have to go in the water to retrieve the tooth and leave a coin, therefore leaving the colour of their fairy dust (glitter) in the water; (2) creating a small rest area out of doll toys for the fairy where they could dry off their wings after going in the water; (3) writing letters to the tooth fairies to inquire about the magical system and society they were from. Questions in these letters could include personal information about each fairy who visited—as it was not a singular tooth fairy but any fairy whose job was to collect teeth—and what purpose our tooth would serve for them. Our family's reciprocal traditions to encourage this behaviour were formed through creating an illusion of these fairies visits by methods including (1) taking the tooth, colouring the water, and leaving a coin; (2) creating intricate, colourful letters from the fairies; (3) responding to the questions from my sister and I in said letters and by leaving notes with answers regarding the functionality of the magic system, information on the society and culture, and each individual fairy's personal identity.

Outside of these active tooth fairy traditions, fairies remained featured in the ways we interacted with the world. They were integrated into the books we read, adventures exploring our paternal grandmother's flower beds for 'garden fairies', and our maternal great-grandmother creating two paintings gifted for each of our rooms based on the imagery in the fairy books. The multi-generational involvement in our fairy beliefs is what shows the multiple actors—besides children— in this folklore; these were actions required from my family to uphold my sister and I's engagement with these supernatural beings. The creation of my great-grandmother's paintings shows how involved the family, specifically the female family members, were in encouraging these childhood folk beliefs. The paintings (Figure 1 and 2) are based off the illustrations by David Christiana (Figure 3 and 4) found in Disney fairy books written by Gail Carson Levine (2005). In another example, my maternal grandmother told me of a time I had lost a tooth when I was staying with her. She frantically got help from her friends nearby—women who were Aunties to me—to get all the supplies needed to perform her part to keep my youthful belief alive. My ritual of the tooth fairy is unique because it required such involvement from my family. Although it was a childhood belief, it was a family practice. I was inspired by the media I consumed, but my faith was encouraged by the 'actions' of the tooth fairies and the continued opportunities for fairy involvement like in the garden or seen in paintings. Fairy beliefs were an immersive experience of my childhood that required external contributions which transformed it into a family folklore practice.

4.3 Parental Involvement

Imagination, innocence, and cuteness became markers of childhood modeled through fairies. Material for this imagination is not solely isolated to peers and play but is "invariably well stocked with materials placed there by adults" (Purkiss 2000, 254). Purkiss' belief that parental involvement influences imagination and fairy belief is supported by Tucker who says that "adults sometimes take significant roles in children's folklore" (2012, 405). Additionally, in a study of modern North American folk beliefs, the Tooth Fairy demonstrated high levels of parental participation which is directly linked to a child's level of involvement and belief in the myth (Prentice et al. 1978, 626). Within the myth-related activities of the Tooth Fairy, the adults must take a significant role in order to foster belief. We can see this reflected in the auto-ethnographic family fairy folklore of this essay. Parental involvement was a defining feature in the extensive knowledge and practices that contributed to my experience of tooth fairies. Multi-generational encouragement was key to the development of imagination in my sister and I as young girls.

However, parental involvement is more than just facilitating a child's belief. Purkiss pushes it one step further by discussing the adults indulging in these "cute" fairies. Although it may be portrayed as adults entering the children's world, in fact, Purkiss claims it is flipped: "the Cute World [of fairies] exists just for the adult, and the child must play along" (200, 256). This view contends with previously discussed ideas of the fairy world existing solely for children, however, it is important to acknowledge that when children grow up and forgo their fairy beliefs it is a loss for adults as they no longer can access interacting with fairies through their children.

Adult indulgence in the fairy world is supported by my auto-ethnography's final card from the tooth fairies seen in Figure 5. Even when we children vocalized that we had outgrown believing in this myth, our mother still indulges in creating one last card from the Chief Tooth Fairy to wish us farewell from our belief and fairy tradition. It reads: "I was sad to hear that you do not believe in the tooth fairy anymore! Luckily your mom does, and she left 6! of your very old teeth for me to collect." This evidence supports Purkiss' theory of inversion of who the fairies' world belongs to. The parental figure still holds the ability and desire to engage with this "cute" world, it is just the children who stop playing along. By engaging with the folklore, it allows parents to embody the myth themselves; they become part of the innocence again and immersed in their children's worldview which is seen as precious while it lasts.

4.4 Providing Structure to Face Fear

The original roots of fairies reflected fears, and this modernized fairy, particularly tooth fairies, reflects that the period of growing up can include a fear of change. Even with their helpful and kind-hearted appearance now, fairies reflect fears of innocence and imagination being lost. Although inspired by the literature in this essay, this theory of fairies providing structure to process fears of growing up is a synthesis of personal family fairy folklore and the claim that fairies can still reflect societal fears in contemporary society even after becoming tiny and cute. Fairies are associated with innocence, childhood, and imagination; as mentioned previously, learning the 'truth' of The Tooth Fairy is a metaphor for receding innocence and gullibility (Tuleja 1991, 13). The Tooth Fairy is a rite of passage that occurs multiple times throughout the ages at which children lose their teeth.

Although only children can 'interact' with the fairies, necessary parental involvement to foster these beliefs indicates a purpose of engaging with this belief for adults. The belief practices of the Tooth Fairy offers an outlet to soothe fears and give excitement to this change marked by children losing their teeth. Losing teeth is potentially a fearful experience because of the foreign sensations, but also because it is evidence of growing older. Tooth Fairy rituals have predetermined actions and

roles that distract both children and adults; it turns fear of the foreign to excitement for the child and soothes a parental fear of their children growing up too quickly. The Tooth Fairy folklore offers structure to navigating an element of the parent-child relationship. The ritual fosters pride and excitement rather than fear as children grow up and lose teeth. Ultimately, the transition out of childhood's innocence is marked by the interactions or lack thereof with fairies.

4.5 Literary Inspiration of Family Fairy Folklore

As discussed with literary fairies, media can play an important role in forming the public perception of fairies. Magliocco's (2019) work with modern Pagans recognized that, in the ongoing influence from many sources to collective fairy lore knowledge, literary and media fairy description including "Grimm tales and their Disney adaptations" (115) have played a bigger role in the perception of fairies to modern Pagans than the older folkloric traditions do (112). There is an ongoing dialogue between sources influencing how folklore is conducted (Magliocco 2019, 108). These 'newer' forms of fairies include characteristics of protectors of children and being helpful towards humans (Magliocco 2019, 112). Similarly to pagan folklore practices, my family folklore practices are also heavily influenced by literature, film, art, and digital platforms of the time.

One of the most significant sources influencing fairy functions and attitudes in my family folklore came from early 2000s children's literature and books. Prominent in our collection of books were "Rainbow Magic" fairy books collectively written under the pseudonym Daisy Meadows and "Disney Fairies" books including *The Hidden World of Fairies* (2008) written by Redbank and Picksey (cover seen in Figure 6), and *Fairy Dust and the Quest for the Egg* (2005) written by Gail Carson Levine and illustrated by David Christiana (cover seen in Figure 7). The worldbuilding in our family practices shared the fundamentals of the literature in which fairies encouraged embracing roles based on natural talents. For example, the Pixie Hollow Disney Fairies are all "talent fairies" with specific gifts informing workload responsibilities of their community, and the Magic Rainbow fairies have a unique role, responsibility, or talent attached to each individual. This concept of 'roles' contextualized tooth fairies for my family as a classification rather than being one individual Tooth Fairy. In the figures depicting letters from tooth fairies to myself, there were multiple fairies who acted as The Tooth Fairy who all had unique names and identities including Penny (Figure 8), Swanfeather (Figure 9), or Orangezest (Figure 10). One fairy even mentions a dragonfly pet named Shimmerfly (Figure 11) which aligns with the type of literature where each fairy had unique identities.

However, the narrative supplying Disney Fairy qualities expanded beyond children's books to include a multitude of media sources and fairy experiences across the Disney Fairy canonical universe. Magliocco's idea of multiple sources to create fairy folklore can be applied to Disney's multiple forms of entertainment all portraying the uniform qualities of this 'Disney Fairy' that perpetuates my family fairy folklore. The fairyland of 'Pixie Hollow' is a Disney creation that has been commodified into books, movies, toys, electronic games, and at one point a dedicated 'Pixie Hollow' attraction at Disneyland. Fairy qualities popularized by media directly correlate to the same qualities seen from the fairies within the auto-ethnographic family folklore because media representations, primarily children's books, were one of the primary sources of exposure to fairies.

4.6 Who Do These Role Models Want Me to Be?

The image presented by fairies becomes an archetype of femininity for girls to imitate in play first, and life later. Young girls are fascinated by fairies, myself included in that statement. This fascination is encouraged by adults and informed by the implicit messages in the media representations. Just as literary fairies were

symbols and role models for Victorian children representing a proper child who was "diligent, or good at grammar, or willing at tidying up" now, modern fairies are associated with a prettiness likened to flowers, talent for hard work, and a domesticated nature to make "a logo for the 'good' middle-class girl" (Purkiss 2000, 311). The change from the Victorian literary fairy to the contemporary Disney Fairy can be identified in the feminist coding of subliminal messages sent to young girls.

Under the growing popularity of feminism coming up to the early 2000s, core elements of folkloric fairies like their independence and critique of patriarchy were no longer something to be deeply feared in the same way. Depictions of fairies could portray *some* of these qualities so long as they remained cute and helpful. The core elements of fairies in original folklore—primarily female, living in isolated communities, and assertive—were not entirely erased from the contemporary representations, like Disney's 'Pixie Hollow.' But the re-inclusion of folkloric fairy traits only applied to jobs and productivity; all other personality traits still encouraged the friendly, cooperative, and innocent nature of literary fairies. These 'cute' fairies of Disney and Rainbow Magic books all had their part to play in their communities through their responsibilities. Purkiss says that although "cute fairies might appear to be all about leisure, they also make the child work" (2000, 258). Early 2000s fairy representations in literature targeted towards young girls reflects the transition towards the societal needs that women must fulfill–working. This is not a true 'return' of the folkloric fairy, as completely embracing those qualities would still be a threat to the same systems of power; it is imperative that fairies—and women—remain cooperative, kind, helpful, and fond of children. Modern fairies encourage a work ethic, but still emphasize that "cuteness is a guide to conduct" (Purkiss 2000, 255). The early 2000s fairy representations follow in the steps of other literary fairy representations which subvert the power that traditional folkloric feminine fairies held by making them cute and laughable. The domestication and 'cuteification' of fairies have turned them into role models reflecting desirable qualities for little girls rather than a reflection of societal fear. The economic and political environment around the turn of the 21st century desired increased workforce and productivity, and the fairy representations prime youth, particularly girls, to step into those roles. In fact, the "feminist" messages of early 2000s fairies target values in girls that will benefit the continuation and expansion of capitalism.

5. Final Remarks

With a similar interpretation, the Tooth Fairy is another example of capitalist values being embedded within fairy representations and rituals. In the beginning, the popularity of the Tooth Fairy took off because of post Second World War affluence (Tuleja 1991, 17). Tuleja says that the Tooth Fairy's message is a product of capitalist society by teaching that "Anything—even your own body—can, if you work it right, be turned to gold" (1991, 20). In my beliefs of the fairy world, the teeth were a physical material that fairies wanted to build with. They would pay the most for a strong, well-brushed molar. A Tooth Fairy ritual teaches young children about exchanging a desired product for monetary value. At its core, the Tooth Fairy is a business lesson preparing children for engagement with the capitalist world awaiting them out of childhood.

This paper finds that fairy representations have gone through three significant stages of development in which they serve unique purposes. As represented in the folkloric fairy, fairies are seen as something to fear. In the Victorian literary fairy, the autonomy and fear associated with fairies is strongly revoked through the miniature, cute, and innocent fairy associated with children. The contemporary fairy serves two purposes that have re-fashioned elements of both the folkloric fairy and the literary fairy. First, the contemporary Tooth Fairy provides a structure to manage fears for both children and parental involvement. In having a clear ritual marking the process of growing up, fairies can help soothe the fear of growing up

too quickly and mark change through childhood. Second, the contemporary fairy qualities and values act as a role model for children. Young girls are a particular target for these role models through the "feminist" branding, yet the values encouraged in girls at heart is to create an agreeable, working mother. Both the characteristics of fairies and the ritual of the Tooth Fairy ultimately work to prepare young children for their socialized duty within their culture–in the context of this paper a capitalist and patriarchal society.

Appendix 1: Figures

Figure 1: Painting by author's great-grandmother of Mother Dove. Wade, Uldeane (Deannie), "The Flames of Love: Mother Dove" 06/04/2010. Photo by: Teagan Dale-Johnson

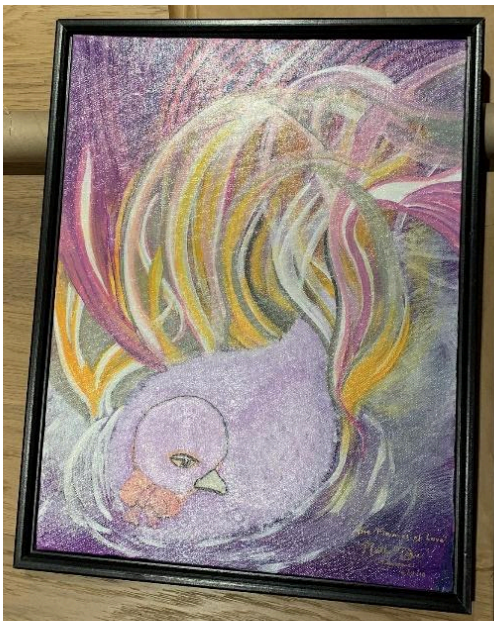


Figure 2: Painting by the author's great-grandmother of fairies. Wade, Uldeane (Deannie), 01/19/2010. Photo by: Teagan Dale-Johnson

Figure 3: Inspiration for Figure 1. Illustration by David Christiana. Photo from user Fleur123 on disneyfairies.fandom.com

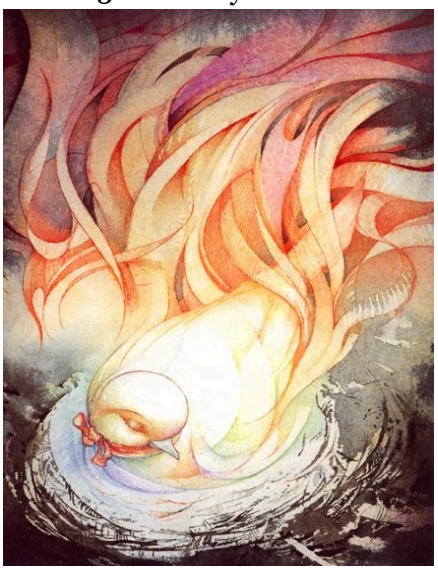


Figure 4: Inspiration for Figure 2. Illustration by David Christiana. Photo from user Fleur123 on disneyfairies.fandom.com

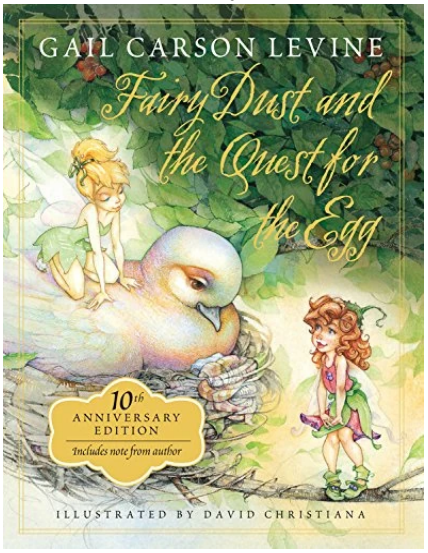


Figure 5: Letter from the Tooth Fairy Chief (Final Letter from Fairies). Photo by Teagan Dale-Johnson.

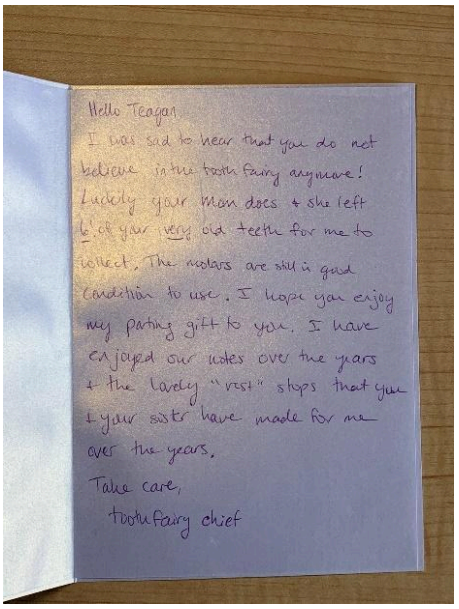


Figure 6: "The Hidden World of Fairies cover photo" from user JR Reyes; Carousell; https://www.carousell.ph/p/the-hidden-world-of-fairies-1193671506/

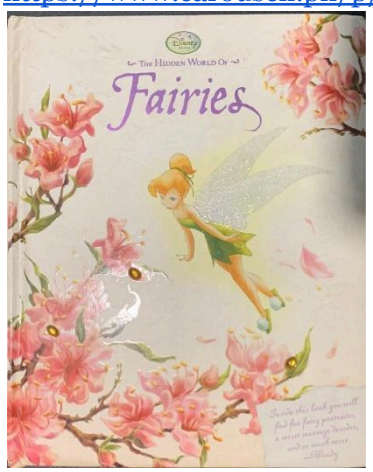


Figure 7: "Fairy Dust and the Quest for the Egg Cover photo" Illustration by David Christina. Photo from user Fleur123 on disneyfairies.fandom.com; https://disneyfairies.fandom.com/wiki/Fairy_Dust_and_the_Quest_for_the_Egg

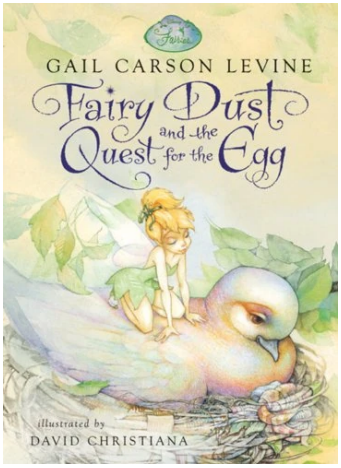


Figure 8: Letter from Penny. Photo by Teagan Dale-Johnson.

Figure 9: Letter from Swanfeather. Photo by Teagan Dale-Johnson.

Figure 10: Letter from Orangezest. Photo by Teagan Dale-Johnson.

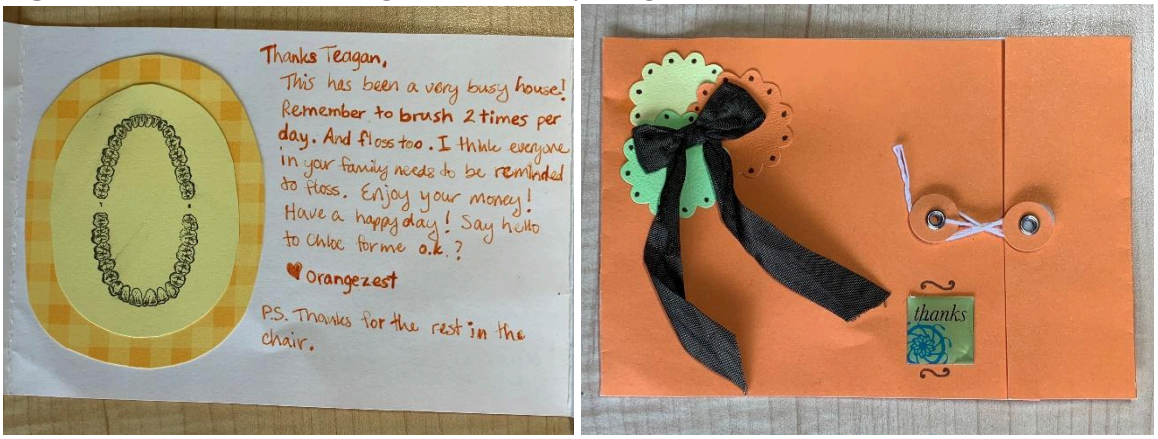
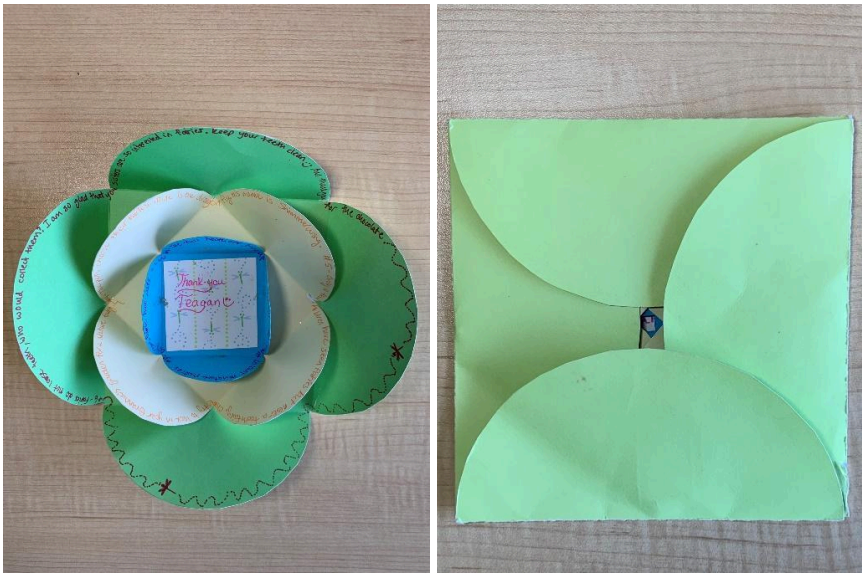


Figure 11: Letter from fairy with dragonfly pet “Shimmerfly”. Photo by Teagan Dale-Johnson.



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