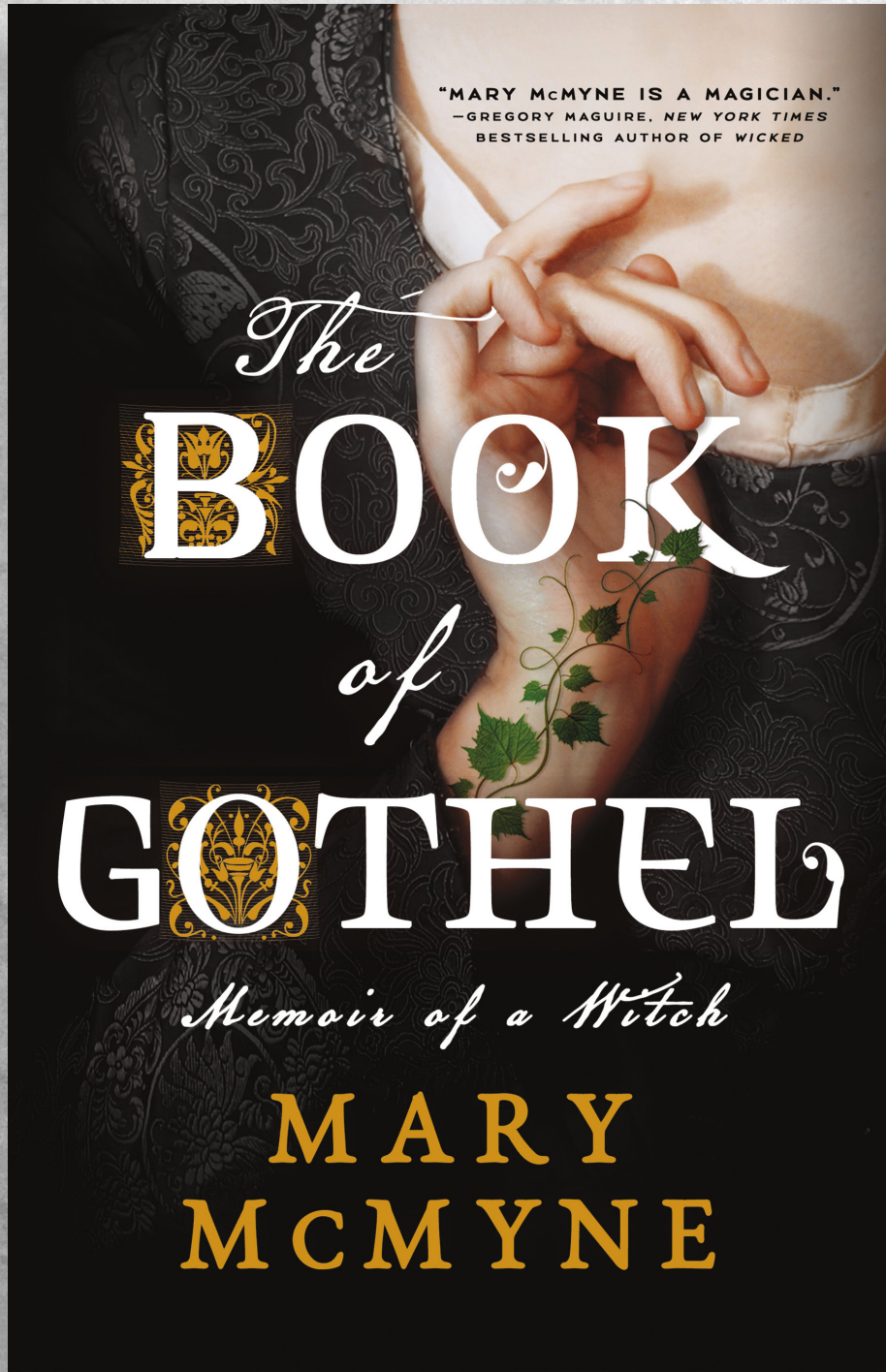


# BOOK CLUB KIT



"MARY MCMYNE IS A MAGICIAN."  
—GREGORY MAGUIRE, NEW YORK TIMES  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF WICKED

*The*  
**BOOK**  
*of*  
**GOTHEL**

*Memoir of a Witch*

**MARY  
MCMYNE**

●●●●  
REDHOOK  
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Dear Reader,

*The Book of Gothel* is an exploration of two of my favorite things: folklore and history. It's a reimagining of 'Rapunzel' from the perspective of the witch, written in ink on parchment in her own words. It's a medieval codex found buried in a Black Forest cellar, Haelewise daughter-of-Hedda's attempt to set the record straight about why she kidnapped Rapunzel. . .

I've loved fairy tales since I was a child, when my mother told stories about wolves and disobedient girls, witches and poison apples. But as an adult, when I sat down to read those stories to my children, I stumbled, reluctant to repeat the words on the page. Folk and fairy tales are famously associated with peasant women, with mothers and grandmothers who told stories beside the spinning wheel or hearth. But the truth is the tales were often collected from privileged members of upper-class authors' own social circles, or heavily adapted when the authors wrote them down. Most of the classic variants we know today are clear products of a patriarchal culture. They star beautiful chaste girls who dream of marriage, princes who rescue princesses and win them like prizes. Anyone who isn't Christian is maligned. And don't get me started on how these tales portray elderly women: they're too often villainized as witches, who'll poison you, lock you in a tower, or eat you up...

*The Book of Gothel* is what happened when I started wondering about the versions of these stories that didn't get written down,

the folk tales that actual peasant women told to one another and their children beside the fire. What if Rapunzel's captor was based on a real historical person, I wondered. If she told her own story, how would she represent herself? Would she call herself a witch or wise woman? Would her magic be as wicked as the Brothers Grimm claimed? What true stories might she tell? How would she represent historical people differently from the noblemen who served as Church scribes? For centuries, those scribes maligned anyone who wasn't Christian. They ignored women unless they ran convents, married princes, or bore royal children. What secrets would a peasant woman's history—a wise woman's history—contain?

In *The Book of Gothel*, you'll encounter surprising portraits of historical figures like Hildegard of Bingen, Frederick Barbarossa, and Beatrice of Burgundy. You'll read gritty, made-up, hybrid ancestors of well-known folk tales. I hope the story gets you thinking about what has been left out of history, about why stories are told the way they are. And I hope you find yourself transported to a fantastical, medieval Black Forest—a place where witches call themselves wise women, princes wear wolf-skins, and a legendary tower stands shrouded in mist. . .

Mary  
Mary McMyne



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *The Book of Gothel* tells the origin story of the Rapunzel fairytale, but also imagines how other tales were influenced by historical events including Little Red Riding Hood and Snow White. Why is re-looking at these tales important? Why do people keep retelling them? And what do you think the author is trying to say about the origins of folk and fairy tales?
2. In the three best known classic versions of the Rapunzel story, Rapunzel's kidnapper is portrayed as a cruel ogress who entraps the maiden with magic (Basile's "Petrosinella"), a more sympathetic fairy who forgives Rapunzel at the end (De La Force's "Persinette"), and an evil witch (Grimm's "Rapunzel"). De La Force is one of the few female fairytale authors whose stories are still popularly discussed. Given this information, what do you think these changes may say about the writers' own biases? What does *The Book of Gothel* say about Mary McMyne's views?
3. What fairytale characters do you feel deserve a second look and why? How would you explain their motives and actions?
4. Haelewise is discriminated against in her village because of her black eyes and fainting spells, and is blamed for a sickness that falls over the village. During the late Middle Ages and beyond, huge numbers of women were persecuted as witches in Europe—for their physical and neurological differences, for perceived slights against others who were more powerful, or for the threat they were thought to pose to society because they lived alone. Anyone who wasn't Christian was subject to extreme persecution too. How do you think the way we describe and talk about villainous figures in stories and real life has changed or stayed the same? What kinds of people do we villainize today?
5. Motherhood is a major theme in this novel; both Haelewise and a character in the frame story wish to be mothers. Why do you think Haelewise desires this so deeply? What do you think the novel has to say about why some women become mothers, and the relationship between mothers and daughters?
6. Mary McMyne blends real historical figures in this otherwise fantastical tale—Hildegard of Bingen in particular plays a significant role. In history, Saint Hildegard was an abbess, writer, composer, philosopher, mystic, visionary, healer and natural historian despite church limitations set on women at the time. What does this portrayal of Hildegard say about her goals and beliefs? How was she able to maneuver within male-dominated spaces? What challenges did she face?
7. The mystical Tower of Gothel is a place where women in difficult and dangerous circumstances can seek refuge. Kunegunde offers women a safe haven and healing, including access to abortion. Why might women of the time require this service? How did you feel about this portrayal?

# FOR FURTHER READING

## on 'Rapunzel' and Other Tales

### **MARIA TATAR'S *THE ANNOTATED BROTHERS GRIMM* (2004)**

A collection of critically annotated translations of the Brothers Grimm folktales into English, featuring beautiful vintage illustrations, a preface by A.S. Byatt, and introductory sections by the author. If you want to read the classic variant of 'Rapunzel' that famously refers to the witch as Mother Gothel, this is the translation I'd recommend.

### **TERRI WINDLING'S "RAPUNZEL, RAPUNZEL: LET DOWN YOUR HAIR" (*MYTHIC PASSAGES: THE MAGAZINE OF IMAGINATION*, 2007, REPRINTED ON THE AUTHOR'S WEBSITE)**

A guide to the many literary variants of 'Rapunzel,' which includes detailed summaries of the three most famous historical versions by Giambattista Basile, Charlotte-Rose de la Force, and the Brothers Grimm. If you're interested in the history of how the 'Rapunzel' fairy tale evolved from its first written variant into the story that is popular today, this is a good place to start.

### **KATE FORSYTH'S *THE REBIRTH OF RAPUNZEL: A MYTHIC BIOGRAPHY OF THE MAIDEN IN THE TOWER* (2016)**

A deep dive into the 'Maiden in the Tower' tale type and the story of how Forsyth came to write her novel about Charlotte-Rose de la Force. Of particular interest to readers of *Gothel* may be the second chapter, which discusses scholarly theories about the ancient roots of 'Rapunzel' and other tales in matriarchal Indo-European myths. Also of interest is the fourth chapter discussing Charlotte-Rose de la Force's life and her version of 'Rapunzel,' which Forsyth notes refers to the witch character as a fairy and portrays her with greater sympathy than the first written variant recorded by Basile.

### **DIANE PURKISS' *AT THE BOTTOM OF THE GARDEN: A DARK HISTORY OF FAIRIES, HOBGOBLINS, NYMPHS, AND OTHER TROUBLESOME THINGS* (2003)**

A history of fairies and other supernatural creatures, which traces their evolution from the demons and nymphs of ancient mythology to the fairies of medieval folklore. Most interesting to me is the connection Purkiss makes between ancient Mediterranean myths about child-killing demons and medieval European folklore about baby-snatching fairies.

### **JACK ZIPES' *BREAKING THE MAGIC SPELL: RADICAL THEORIES OF FOLK & FAIRY TALES* (1979)**

This landmark study discusses how folk tales evolved from an ancient oral "people's" tradition into the sanitized, mass-produced, Christianized fairy tales that are so popular today. I particularly appreciate when Zipes discusses issues of gender and politics alongside economics, class, and industrialization.

### *Other Rapunzel Retellings*

- Zel, Donna Jo Napoli, novel (1996)
- "Tale of the Hair" in *Kissing the Witch*, Emma Donoghue, story collection (1997)
- Fairest of Them All*, Carolyn Turgeon, novel (2013)
- Bitter Greens*, Kate Forsyth, novel (2014)
- "Said Rapunzel to the Wolf" in *Goblin Fruit*, Sally Rosen Kindred, poem (2014)
- "Rapunzel: I Like the Quiet" in *Unexplained Fevers*, Jeannine Hall Gailey, poetry collection (2015)

# FAIRY TALE EASTER EGGS

Although this book connects most closely to the ‘Rapunzel’ tale, there are dark references to other tales hidden throughout the novel. Haelewise either hears gritty proto-variants of these tales from her mother or invents versions herself. Below is a guide to five classic tales and a few of the story elements they inspired in *The Book of Gothel*.



At various points in the novel, Haelewise paints Prince Ulrich as the wolf from Red Riding Hood and herself as Red. There’s the wolf-skin, her deep red tarnkappe.

*And then there he was. The largest wolf I’d ever seen, loping out of the shadows. A terrible thing, wrong, with none of the beauty of the natural beast...*

It’s possible that a 12th century peasant girl in southwestern Germany might know the Red Riding Hood story, although it would take a different form than the version we know today. Although classic variants have Red get eaten by the wolf or saved by a woodsman at the end, folklorists have found French oral variants they suspect are much older, which end with Red tricking the wolf into letting her escape, as Haelewise recalls here.

*Rōtkupfelin was the name of the girl in one of my mother’s tales. The story went that she met a werewolf on her way to her grandmother’s, who encouraged her to stop to pick flowers along the path. The werewolf beat Rōtkupfelin to her grandmother’s, ate the old woman, and crept into the old woman’s bed to wait for her. But when Rōtkupfelin got there, and the werewolf asked her to get into bed with him, she escaped by telling him she needed to go outside to relieve herself...*

## Little Red Riding Hood



## Snow White/Sleeping Beauty



Thanks to Disney, everyone knows the Perrault variant of ‘Sleeping Beauty,’ in which a fairy curses a long-awaited baby to prick her finger on a spindle and die. Just as famous is that other tale featuring a pricked finger and a heroine who falls into a deep sleep: ‘Snow White.’ I imagined this dark medieval ancestor to both tales, which Haelewise invents to shock Matthäus:

*“From the petals of that rose there came a fairy. A wicked nymph with hair the color of night and skin the color of snow. Her hair was a tangle of black thorns, and her lips were blood-red. She sang a terrible tune:*

*‘Life from life! Snow White is my name.*

# FAIRY TALE EASTER EGGS

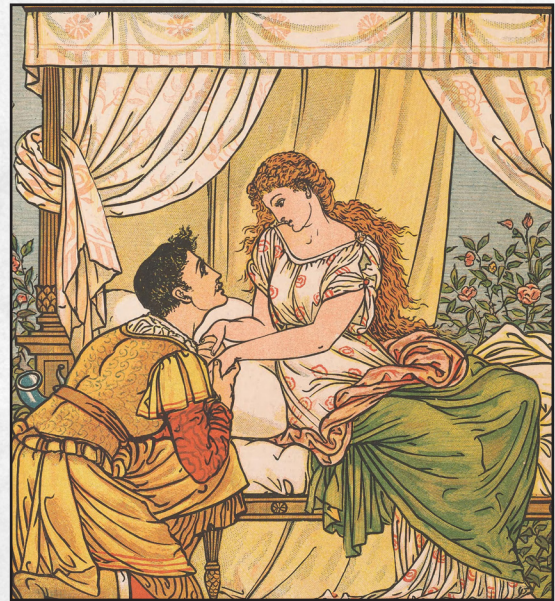
*Your child will die in three days time  
unless you make it her name too...'*

What if the song the minnesinger sang based on this tale at the wedding feast spread, getting told and retold?

*"The queen at the window with needle and thread,  
Seven years, childless, has shared the king's bed.  
In sorrow, she pricks a soft finger against barb.  
Into the snow falls a red drop of blood."*

How would other characters who know the truth behind this song change it in retelling? What if Beatrice's mirror magic was the inspiration for the incantation we all know today?

*Mirror, mirror, on the wall...*



## The Griffin

*"In the end," Mother went on, finally,  
"it was not a healer who cured the girl.  
It was the girl herself who found the cure  
in a plant that grew just outside their  
doorstep. This plant bore tiny golden  
apples that shriveled as winter came,  
filling the air with a heavenly scent. The  
day the girl ate one, once and for all, her  
fevers left."*

Hedda's "Tale of the Golden Apple" prefigures a part of a lesser-known tale collected by the Brothers Grimm, "The Griffin," in which a king seeks a cure for his daughter's illness. The cure is an apple, much like Hedda's golden apples here, which Haelewise will later find out is alrune, the Middle High German word for mandrake.



## The Three Ravens

*... the three pebble-crosses  
beside the herb garden,  
which marked the graves  
of my three elder brothers  
who'd been born dead.*

Now known by the title of the tale in the final edition of their collection, "Seven Ravens," the Brothers Grimm originally called this story of seven brothers who get turned into birds and saved by their youngest sister "Three Ravens," because there are only three brother-birds in the first edition. If you think about the spell Kunegunde can cast transferring souls into the bodies of birds and how many ravens she keeps at the tower, you'll see where this is going...



*When I finally looked up, I saw Kunegunde kneeling a  
few feet away, wobbling as she tried to support herself.  
Before her, Erste was splayed out, the dagger forgotten  
nearby in the snow. When she saw me looking at her, she  
cried out, her voice slurred.*

*"What have you done?"*

# HISTORICAL CHARACTERS



## DER KÜRENBERGER

*(first name and dates unknown)*

“Ludwig” of Kurenberg, the performer at Phoebe of Kurenberg’s wedding, is based on a real 12th century minnesinger whose songs are recorded in the Codex Manesse. His most well-known song is one about a falconer pining the loss of a falcon, on which the mocking song at the feast is based.

## BEATRICE OF BURGUNDY

*(1143 – 1184)*

Relatively little is known of Beatrice of Burgundy compared to what is known of her husband. Her major contributions to history are traditionally seen as the benefits she brought to her husband: the land she provided him as a dowry and the children she bore him. However, a 14th century manuscript shows her speaking to Pope Alexander alongside her husband, and there are rumors that Frederick was “under her influence.” I took great delight in filling the gaps in her biography with fantastical elements that empowered her.



## ADELHEID OF VOHBURG

*(~ 1125 – 1187)*

Frederika’s banished mother is based on a real person, Adelheid of Vohburg, the first wife of Frederick Barbarossa. In 1153, Frederick petitioned the Pope to

annul their marriage. Some sources say Adelheid committed adultery, but I agree with Haelewise that Frederick most likely discarded her because she never gave birth to an heir.

## PRINCESS FREDERIKA

*(1146 – 1158)*

There is absolutely no evidence that Frederick Barbarossa and Adelheid of Vohburg had a daughter. In fact, historians say their marriage was childless. I added Frederika in my first draft, playing with the idea that medieval scribes would ignore even an Emperor’s daughter if she died before she married and had children.



“What a boon it is to have a mother who loves you. A mother who comes to life when you walk into the room, who tells stories at bedtime, who teaches you the names of plants that grow wild in the wood. But it is possible for a mother to love too much, for love to take over her heart like a weed does a garden, to spread its roots and proliferate until nothing else grows. . .”

# HISTORICAL CHARACTERS



## FREDERICK BARBAROSSA

(1122 – 1190)

Frederick I, known in Italian as Frederick “Barbarossa” and in German as Kaiser “Rotbart” for his red beard, is considered by many historians to have been a great medieval emperor. By all accounts he was ambitious, strategic, diplomatic. But I couldn’t help but think a peasant woman would have a different perspective on a royal, a Crusader, a man whose power rivalled that of the Church. Someone like Haelewise would be able to clearly see his flaws. One of the rumors surrounding his name is that it implied that Frederick’s beard was red not with natural pigment but the blood of his enemies. From this tidbit, I took a bit of license with his character, wondering if he was protective of Frederika. If she was hurt, how angry would he get?

## HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

(~1098 – 1179)

Hildegard of Bingen was a fascinating and complicated woman: a powerful abbess, a composer, an herbalist, a healer, an author, an architect, a visionary, and a preacher. Famous for her visions and the migraine-like illnesses that accompanied them, which she seems to have used to manipulate her contemporaries, the abbess was a brilliant rhetorician and diplomat. Her writing is ambitious, at turns compassionate and incredibly judgmental. Her correspondence reveals she had a deep adoration for the sacred greenening power of nature, a powerful affinity for a nun named Richardis, and the odd habit of encouraging her nuns to dress in finery as brides of Christ. One of the great joys of writing medieval historical fantasy is that there are a number of delightful gaps in the record to fill. It’s unclear how much Hildegard’s manuscripts were altered by Church scribes, and reading her books, I couldn’t help but wonder if certain passages could truly be attributed to her. My imagination took flight. Did the scribes who copied and transmitted her manuscripts alter content that disagreed with Church positions? Did Hildegard invent her secret language, the *lingua ignota*, because she had something to hide?



“Three times, I’ve tried to chronicle this part of my story. Three times, I’ve failed and scraped my shame from the page. The language I learned as a girl—this language we all speak—doesn’t have the words to describe what happened next...But the old language has only survived in spells and oaths. I have no choice to write these clumsy words onto this page. This try will have to do, whether I fail or no. May the Mother forgive me. . .”





**MARY McMYNE** has widely published stories and poems in venues like *Redivider*, *Gulf Coast*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Apex Magazine*, and her debut fairy-tale poetry chapbook, *Wolf Skin* (Dancing Girl Press, 2014), won the Elgin Chapbook Award. She is a graduate of the New York University MFA Program.

  @MaryMcMyne