

Wild Sanctuary: Running into the Forest in Russian Fairy Tales

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In many European fairy tales, the wolf is a villain, leading the protagonist into the dark realm of the forest to commit crimes with impunity. Alternatively, in Russian fairy tales, particularly “Tsarevitch Ivan, the Fire Bird, and the Gray Wolf,” the wolf is a figure of salvation, aiding the protagonist in their quest. The Gray Wolf provides Ivan with wise counsel, escape, and resurrection from death; he even shapeshifts into a princess to outsmart an evil tsar. However, when events are outside his power, The Gray Wolf directs Ivan to the only other being in the forest that can also shapeshift—the witch Baba Yaga.

Although the Russian *taiga*, or boreal forest, is a wild and liminal space, it is the only hope of survival for the fairy tale protagonists, especially women. The beings that inhabit the forest (Baba Yaga, The Gray Wolf, the *Leshii*, or forest spirits who take the form of wolves) help them escape. It is in populated areas—villages and cities—where women are most threatened by husbands or fathers who wish them dead. If Little Red Cap wandered into a Russian fairy tale, her peril would not come from a wolf in the forest, but her own home, where she might be beaten with whips and rods, harnessed to a sledge in place of horses, spit on, thrown into a pit to be forgotten, or hurled to the earth with such force that only her braid would be found. If she is to survive, as Vasilisa did, she must go into the forest and place herself into the paws of the wolf, or the ancient hands of Baba Yaga. In this presentation, I will look at wolves and witches in Russian fairy tales as magical respites from the brutalities of humanity.

Shannon Scott is an adjunct professor of English at the University of St. Thomas. In 2013, she co-edited with Alexis Easley the collection, *Terrifying Transformations: An Anthology of Victorian Werewolf Fiction, 1838-1896*. Shannon has presented papers on werewolves at various venues, including the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals conference in London, North Carolina State University, and the Midwest Modern Language Association conference in Chicago. In 2015, her essay, “Female Werewolf as Monstrous Other in Honoré Beaugrand’s ‘The Werewolves’” was published in *She-Wolf: A Cultural History of the Female Werewolf* by Manchester University Press. She is currently at work on her first novel.