Wicked, Selfish, and Cruel:
An Inquiry into the Stepmother Narrative

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I have always been fascinated by difficult loves, and stepmothers, as the fairy tales all tell, are inherently a challenge… Andrew Solomon (60)

On an early spring morning in 1930, a tiny second-floor apartment in Erie, Pennsylvania erupted in flames. The Mumbulo family—Ralph, Edna, and eleven-year-old Hilda—lived in the one-bedroom space. Ralph was a welder and had already left for work, so when the fire broke out, Edna, whose dressmaking business was based out of the apartment, was at home alone with Hilda. Flimsy composition walls separated them from their neighbors. By the time the fire department arrived, the building was already engulfed in smoke, and most of the tenants were out on the street. Emergency medics found Hilda collapsed on a neighbor's cot, unconscious from smoke inhalation, with critical burns on her face and body. She was rushed to the local medical center, but four hours later, Hilda died of burn trauma. In the police investigation, traces of gasoline corroborated Edna's story that the pan of gasoline she had been using to clean a dress had ignited. The exact cause of the fire was not determined, criminal charges were not pressed, and soon thereafter, the investigation officially closed (Laythe 4-6).

Later that spring, however, the investigation reopened after a neighbor confided suspicions to the coroner that the fire had been deliberately set. The restored inquiry revealed that Edna had not been Hilda's biological mother. Amid revelations that Hilda was to inherit a large sum from her deceased mother's estate, a witch hunt for Edna ensued. Swiftly, Edna transformed from a good mother whose daughter had died in an unfortunate fire, into a wicked stepmother who had deliberately, with her husband as passive accomplice, set her stepdaughter aflame (6-7).

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By 1990, when Edna Mumbulo died, few remembered her as the "Erie Murderess" or the "Torch Killer of 1930" (1). In Erie, none could recall the sensational trial that accused and convicted Edna of murdering her stepdaughter (11). Even with court archives, one would have difficulty pinpointing the exact moment when Edna Mumbulo transformed in her neighbors' eyes from an ordinary woman into "a character, a prototype, a sinister cliché" (Martin 41). However, as criminologist and historian Joseph Laythe writes, "It can hardly be denied that that [sic] public opinion held gendered views of crime—women do not commit crimes, but those that do commit the most horrific crimes and are stepmothers are the most evil of all women," and in 1930, the case drew hundreds of onlookers to the courthouse (11). Laythe concludes, "her gender and her status as a stepmother affected both the public perception and court decisions of her case. The idea of a mother killing a child, to many, seemed beyond comprehension. Mothers are supposed to be caring, loving, and nurturing. Stepmothers, according to the myth, are not" (15).

Although the chronicles of Edna Mumbulo may have slipped into obscurity, the roles are very familiar. The wicked stepmother. The passive father. The dead mother. The innocent child. It's a cast of fairy tale stereotypes, but it's also news. An Internet search of recent headlines quickly reveals that the lurid caricature is thriving today. *The Hollywood Reporter*, addressing elder abuse accusations against the wife of famed DJ Casey Kasem, reported in June 2014 "Casey Kasem's Daughter on Her Stepmother: 'I Want This Evil Woman in Jail.'" In July 2014, a federal judge in Hawaii had ruled that a so-called "'evil stepmother derived pleasure" from severely beating her five-year-old stepdaughter, and *NBC News* reported, "Judge Sentences 'Evil Stepmother' to 20 Years." In October 2014, the U.K. newspaper *The Mirror* announced, "Boy found alive after being battered, strangled and THROWN into quarry by evil stepmother,"

reporting from China's Guishou province, where the stepmother of a seven-year-old boy allegedly sought revenge for her husband's divorce filing. The stepmother is now facing fifteen years' imprisonment for abduction and attempted murder.

In popular culture, the stepmother caricature is wicked, selfish, and cruel. She is a monstrous, abusive, and hated villain. She is greedy for fortune and attention. She is jealous of her stepchildren, and in a witchy rage will stoop to the vilest levels of savagery. Like all caricatures, her features are exaggerated, her qualities grotesquely overwrought, and her reputation indefatigable. A stubbornly persistent story, it artlessly pokes its way around the newsrooms and psyche of popular culture. Marriage and family therapist Bette U. Kiernan writes, "Stories are important in our lives. We gain a sense of who we are through narratives, the telling of stories to ourselves and others about what has happened to us. We form our identities through integrating our personal family histories with the legends of our culture" (Kiernan 1). That stories are important is the very basis of cultural identity, from biblical parables to national pride. That they have power is the backbone of modern-day marketing firms. But what if the stories carried by our culture are at odds with our personal family structures? What if the legends bequeathed to us hold qualities that directly oppose the healthy identities we seek to develop? Why is the story of the wicked stepmother so tenacious?

Several years into my own role as a stepmother, when my oldest stepdaughter was twelve, I realized that despite having only a cursory familiarity with fairy tales, the "wicked stepmother" narrative gnawed at the back of my mind. My partner's daughters were five and eight years old when we met. Two years later, when the four of us moved into a house together, the oldest began introducing me to her friends as "stepmom." At first, the title surprised me. I had not previously given much thought to the word, and had not quite realized that I would don

the title once we all became a family. Several years after that, when the oldest was in middle school and beginning to express typical teenage angst coupled with unresolved anger about her parents' divorce, I detected the "wicked" story at the edge of my thoughts. Did she think of me that way? I wondered. I began second-guessing my every parenting choice. If I asked her to clear the dining table, did she think Cinderella? If her father took my side, was she Gretel? One morning, while out with a friend, the conversation naturally turned to parenting topics. As I relayed a recent challenge with our middle-schooler, I mentioned my "wicked stepmother" unease to my friend.

"Why do you care about that?" my friend asked.

It made me wonder—why *did* I care about that? And yet, I did. I had never read the actual fairy tales, but as a child had seen the Disney films. I had not consciously noticed the news headlines that perpetuated the trope, but I somehow instinctively knew that the words *evil* and *stepmother* were as culturally linked as *peanut butter* and *jelly*. Now a stepmother, I was suddenly cognizant of the cruel depictions and the merciless marriage between "stepmother" and "cruelty." Though I couldn't name them, I suspected countless stepmother characters supported this malevolent narrative. Even worse, I realized that the narrative was crippling my own self-confidence as a parent, possibly undermining my stepdaughter's trust in me, and certainly impairing communication between the two households that our children moved between several times a week. The stepmother narrative created a direct conflict between my role as a parenting adult in my children's lives and the role society cast me to play.

Not having a stepparent of my own to assuage my confusion or to help resolve the narrative discord, I reached out to friends for real stories based on real stepmothers. I asked both American and international friends about their thoughts and feelings on the word *stepmother* and

found the cruel stereotype deeply embedded in their psyches, and widespread across cultural lines. Friends from New Jersey, North Carolina, and California had the same negative associations as my friends from Mexico, Venezuela, and Belarus.

"I can answer for my four-year-old," wrote Sarah V. from New Jersey. "She TOTALLY thinks stepmothers and stepsisters are naturally evil due to 'Cinderella'. She definitely thinks 'stepmother' always comes after wicked and is akin to 'witch' or something along those lines."

Laura T. from North Carolina wrote, "I have negative, Disney-induced associations with 'stepmom' that initially override the varied experiences I have of witnessing other peoples' relationships with stepmoms, and my own experiences as a stepmom. 'Stepdad' stays more varied without the negative connotation."

My multilingual friends shared the word for "stepmother" in their other languages, along with their distaste for the hateful insinuations attached to it. My Californian friend Amy, who is deaf, told me that in American Sign Language, stepmom is a compound word from the signs "fake" and "mother." I asked her to show me the two words. "Fake," she said, as she raised her right hand. She crossed the center of her index finger over her nose. "Mom," she said, and spread her five fingers as she touched her thumb to her chin.

In Spanish and Portuguese, the word stepmother is *madrastra*, coming from madre which means mother, with an added pejorative suffix. The literal translation is "lesser mother." Ligiah, a friend who emigrated from Mexico to the film and television industry in Los Angeles, wrote, "It sounds horrible in Spanish, and it was the word used in *Cinderella*, so if you had a nice stepmom, it was weird to have her associated with THAT mom. I always just called her 'my father's wife.'"

"*Madrastra* in Spanish," a Venezuelan friend wrote. "It sounds ugly."

Another friend agreed, "I hate the Spanish word. *Madrastra* sounds like the Wicked Witch of the West."

Natalie, from Belarus, told me, "You pronounce it *macheha*. Mother sounds like *mat*, and there's no real second word here, just a suffix added to mother. But the sound of it is quite evil. By the way, the plant coltsfoot is called *мать-и-мачеха* in Russian, literally mother-and-stepmother, because its leaves are warm on the one side and cold on the other."

As disheartening as these findings were, they sparked my curiosity to dig deeper into the harsh narrative. This essay explores the wicked stepmother's historical and international domain, with particular attention to the Brothers Grimm fairy tales which have bequeathed us some of the most dominant images of the stepmother-witch. Curious to discern if there was a beneficial relevance to the trope, I examined the historical contexts which sustained the stereotype, along with Freudian and Jungian psycho- and neo-analytic interpretations. Alongside my examination, I inquired into the need for a counter-narrative of the marginalized other mother, and surveyed contemporary stepmother counter-narratives that expose the complex, authentic nature behind the women who mother other mothers' children.

Like the wicked stepmother concept, certain phrases are embedded in modern society's collective consciousness. "Once upon a time…" is one of these. It is the opening to many of our most recognizable fairy tales, and it is the opening to "Snow White," one of the leading stepmother fairy tales. This story, well known for the 1937 Walt Disney animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, depicts a conflict between the innocent heroine Snow White and her narcissistic stepmother.

"Once upon a time in the middle of winter, when snowflakes the size of feathers were falling from the sky, a queen was sitting and sewing by a window with an ebony frame" (Grimm

Annotated 249). At the beginning of the story, a queen wishes for a daughter "as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window frame" (249). Soon after, she does bear a child with these qualities, but a short time later, the good queen mother dies. In time, the king takes a new wife who "was a beautiful lady, but proud and domineering, and she could not bear the thought that anyone might be more beautiful than she was." The new queen frequently stands at a magic mirror asking, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest one of all?" Each time, the mirror responds, "You, O Queen, are the fairest of all," and the queen is pleased (250). When Snow White reaches the age of seven, however, the queen's magic mirror changes its response. "My queen, you may be the fairest here, but Snow White is a thousand times more fair." The stepmother burns with a murderous rage, and summons a huntsman to kill Snow White in the forest. "I don't want to set eyes on her ever again," the queen tells him. "Bring me her lungs and her liver as proof that you have killed her." The huntsman takes Snow White out to the forest, but finds pity for her. He releases the child, and brings the wicked queen the lungs and liver of a boar. Meanwhile, the frightened child discovers a cottage in the woods. The dwarfs who live there welcome her to stay with them, and they strive to protect her (251). Soon, the stepmother queen finds out that Snow White is still alive, and disguising herself as an old peddler woman, attempts to kill the girl three times (255).

Snow White is eventually rescued by a prince, and they live happily ever after, but the Disney rendition leaves out the Grimms stepmother fate. "Iron slippers had already been heated up for her over a fire of coals. They were brought in with tongs and set up right in front of her. She had to put on the red-hot iron shoes and dance in them until she dropped to the ground dead." Maria Tatar, folklore expert and Harvard University Professor of Germanic Languages and Literatures, notes in her 2004 translated collection, *The Annotated Brothers Grimm: The*

Bicentennial Edition, that unlike some fairy-tale villains who repent their sinful ways, Snow

White's stepmother is presented as cowardly, with no sign of remorse (261).

The stepmother in "Hansel and Gretel" is no kinder. Tatar's translation of the story,

which she based on the Brothers' Grimm final version published in 1857, begins:

> At the edge of a great forest, there once lived a poor woodcutter with his wife and
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> two children. The little boy was called Hansel, and the girl was named Gretel.
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> There was never much to eat in their home, and once, during a time of famine, the
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> woodcutter could no longer put bread on the table. At night, he lay in bed
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> worrying, tossing and turning in despair. With a deep sigh, he turned to his wife
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> and said: "What is going to become of us? How can we possibly take care of our
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> poor little children when the two of us don't have enough to eat?" (73)

The stepmother suggests that they take the children into the deepest part of the forest, and

abandon them to fend for themselves or die. The father protests, but the stepmother warns that if

they don't, he "might as well start sanding the boards for our coffins." The passive father finally

agrees to her plan, but when Hansel overhears his stepmother's nagging plot, he stuffs his

pockets with moonstone pebbles to mark the path. As planned, the father and stepmother

abandon the children in the deep forest, but when night falls, the moon shines on Hansel's

pebbles, and the siblings follow their glow back home (74-75).

"Not long after that, every square inch of the country was stricken by famine," and the

stepmother again convinces her reluctant husband to lead the children into the woods. "All that's

left is half a loaf of bread, and when that's gone, we're finished. The children have to go," she

pleads, and locks the front door so that Hansel cannot gather moonstones (76). This time, as the

children are led away from the house, Hansel drops crumbs of bread. When the moon rises, the

children find that the birds have eaten all the crumbs, and their pathway home is lost (78). On the third day of the children's roaming, they discover a house made of bread with a roof "made of cake and the windows of sparkling sugar." The starving children satisfy their hunger by nibbling on the corners of the house, which awakens the old woman who lives there. The old woman, a wicked witch in disguise, has seduced Hansel and Gretel into a trap with her delicious house. "The old woman had only pretended to be kind… As soon as a child fell into her hands, she killed it, cooked it, and ate it" (81).

In this story, at the very moment that the witch dies—when Gretel shoves her in the oven—so does the children's stepmother. Meanwhile, the tale says that the father "had not had a happy hour since the day that he had abandoned his children in the forest. His wife had died." The siblings escape and find their way to a spot in the woods where their father's house appears in the distance (85). In her accompanying annotations, Tatar writes,

> That [the stepmother] is dead suggests some kind of inner identity between her and the wicked witch. Whereas the stepmother at home was intent on starving the children, providing neither food nor nurturing care, the witch in the forest initially appears to be a splendidly bountiful figure, offering the children a sumptuous repast and comfortable beds. Yet she represents an intensification of the maternal evil at home, for she feeds the children only in order to fatten them up for her next meal (85).

Perhaps the most famous of all stepmothers is Cinderella's. Tatar writes, "The enduring appeal of 'Cinderella' derives not only from the rags-to-riches trajectory of the tale's heroine but also from the way in which the story engages with classic family conflicts" (119). Although the

tale itself focuses primarily on the rivalry between Cinderella and her stepsisters, it begins, as many of them do, with the loss of the beloved biological mother:

> The wife of a rich man fell ill one day. When she realized that the end was near, she called her only daughter to her bedside and said: "Dear child, if you are good and say your prayers faithfully, our dear Lord will always help you, and I shall look down from heaven and always be with you." Then she closed her eyes and passed away.

The father remarries, and with that new union two stepsisters, whose faces were beautiful but whose hearts "were foul and black" (122), move into Cinderella's home. One day, the king invites all the beautiful young ladies to attend a festival where his son will choose a bride. Cinderella pleads with her stepmother to allow her to go. Her stepmother reluctantly consents under the condition that Cinderella first spend two hours picking out lentils from the ashes of the fire. With the task completed and the two hours passed, the stepmother reneges, saying, "You can't come along because you don't have anything to wear and you don't know how to dance. You would just embarrass us" (125).

In this version, a magical hazel branch planted over Cinderella's mother's grave grows into a tree which houses a sympathetic bird. "The bird threw down to her a dress of gold and silver, along with slippers embroidered with silk and silver" (128). Cinderella dresses and goes to the festival, where the prince dances with her on each of the three nights. At the end of each night, Cinderella flees anonymously back to her house, donning her ashen dress before her family returns home (130). On the last night of the festival, in hopes of finally learning the identity of his dance partner, the prince orders the castle staircase painted with pitch. That night, as Cinderella flees, her slipper sticks in the tar, leaving the prince a clue to her identity, and he

declares that "only the woman whose foot fits this golden shoe will be my bride." The next morning, the prince visits Cinderella's house with the slipper. In her hopes that he will select one of her daughters, the stepmother has them each chop their feet down to the slipper's size. However, despite the stepsisters' gruesome efforts, the prince discovers that Cinderella is the one whose foot fits the shoe (131-133). As with Snow White and her prince, despite the stepmother's persecution, the heroine and Prince live happily ever after.

In the Grimms' tales, the father and his first wife are happy. Their child is deeply wanted and loved by the good mother, who sadly dies and is replaced by the cruel and abusive stepmother. Jack Zipes, professor emeritus of German and comparative literature at the University of Minnesota, opens his translation of "Cinderella" with "Once upon a time there was a rich man who lived happily with his wife for a long time, and they had one little girl together" (Grimm *Original* 69). No matter which translation, the cruel stepmother stands in contrast to the benevolent biological mother who, despite her untimely death, holds undying love for her child (Tatar *Hard Facts* 155). Whether neglectful as in "Hansel and Gretel," murderous as in "Snow White," or abusive as in "Cinderella," "stepmothers [in the Brothers Grimm tales]…rank among the most memorable of villains," writes Maria Tatar in her book *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales.* Even among the ogres, evil cooks, and cruel mothers-in-law, the very title "stepmother" pins the badge of iniquity on a character. "One can safely argue that the phrase *wicked stepmother*, which has a nearly formulaic ring to it, is pleonastic" (141). Certainly, in my informal survey of friends, I found it redundant to add the "wicked" modifier to "stepmother."

In fact, though, tracing the history of these stories reveals that many of the Brothers Grimm stepmothers were once biological mothers. In her article "Happily Ever After," Wendy Smith writes, "The Grimms were so disturbed by the abundance of murderous mothers in folk

tales that they recast some as stepmothers." Upon investigation, we find that in the early versions of "Hansel and Gretel," the woodcutter and his wife are both the biological parents of the two children (Grimm *Annotated 73).*

Yet, lest we wonder too deeply about the switch, Smith reminds us that while "the Grimms may have added a few stepmothers to lift the moral burden from Mom, second wives were quite common long before divorce." In her personal essay "Wicked," stepmother Roxana Robinson imagines the scenario from the perspective of Cinderella's stepmother:

> You're a widow, with two daughters in their late teens. You have remarried, which is fortunate, because, at this moment in history, marriage is the only career available. It's especially fortunate that you have married a wealthy nobleman, but your story doesn't end here, happily ever after, because you are not only a wife but a mother. Your own happy ending depends on your daughters' happy beginnings. You love your daughters very much, especially since their father is dead. A part of their life is missing, and you are particularly tender and protective toward them....
>
> Every time you see [Cinderella], you fear again that your daughters, who are not the daughters of a nobleman, will not find husbands. They will not bear children, and in the eyes of the world they will be failures. You will have no grandchildren, your family will die with your daughters....
>
> But a handsome prince arrives, a ball planned. Your daughters are invited, of course. Cinderella, who is younger, is not invited. Obviously, it would not be appropriate for her to go, but since she is an adolescent, she doesn't care what is appropriate, and wants to go anyway. Of course you tell her she may not, and

when her father asks, you tell him with some asperity that it is out of the question

(120-122).

This perspective, painted with a feminist brush, urges examination of the realities of the time and place where these stories were recorded.

As Joan Acocella notes in her essay, "Once Upon a Time: The Lure of the Fairy Tale," women died young in childbirth, men remarried, and resources were scarce. The oral folk tales traded by travelers in the taverns and women in the spinning room reflected the frequent famine, scorned children, wild forests, long hours of manual labor, and gruesome deaths of real life. These harsh realities hold prominent placement in the stories that were passed around. The Brothers Grimm—Jacob and Wilhelm—were philologists and scholars whose academic and nationalistic interests led them to transcribe regional folk tales. The stories made their way into Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's work before industrialization and changing times eradicated the traditions. Writer Thomas O'Neill visited the Grimms childhood home in the Hessian region, northwest of Bavaria, Germany, for his *National Geographic* essay on the Grimms, "the preeminent cartographers of make-believe." Wandering through the center of the town, O'Neill writes of standing in the shadow of a bleak, moat-ringed 16th-century castle and the thickly wooded forests that ring the region and serve as the backdrop of many Grimm tales, and notes the basic facts of life in that region that included, among other things, famine, wolves, and stepmothers. "Most of the Grimms' tales cannot be made wholly respectable," Acocella writes, because life itself was not.

While the Grimms gathered the stories, much of Europe was at war against Napoleon. It was a time of great change in Europe, and the Grimms endeavored to preserve their culture by compiling a distinctly German body of work. The German Confederation, a loose league of

thirty-nine sovereign states, was still half a century away from unifying as one German nation, and the instability of Europe's shift to capitalism had brought poverty and relentless menial labor into family homes. In her article, "The Stepmother in the Grimms' Children's and Household Tales," social researcher Caitlin Hewitt-White argues that in many circumstances, the Grimms' stories lay blame on the outsider for the region's struggles. With their "love of the underdog, rustic simplicity, [and] sexual modesty," the Grimms' 200-plus tales reflect the values of the Teutonic region (O'Neill), which included Christian qualities valorizing the biological family and demonizing the "outsider/other." Jews, whose Jewishness was just beginning to become racialized as "Semitic," and Africans, who were being stolen from their home at the height of the slave trade, were starkly demonized in the tales (Hewitt-White 122). Hewitt-White contends that the Grimms consciously painted similarities between Jews, Blacks, witches, and stepmothers, and entwined them all with moralistic messages about crime and punishment and infiltration into an already-formed family unit (Hewitt-White 132).

In December of 1812, the Grimms published their first volume of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, or *Children's Stories and Household Tales* (Grimm *Original* xvii). It initially received dour reviews and sold poorly, but the Grimms were still young in their academic careers, and was followed by a second volume in 1815. By the second revised edition of the double-volume book, the Grimms' editorial hands had begun smoothing the rough oral tales into more elegant stories (Grimm *Annotated* xlv). The scholarly work originally intended for an adult audience shifted as the Grimms found a wider readership in the nursery. Over the next forty-three years, the seven revised editions featured significant editorial changes (Grimm *Original* xvii). In his revisions, Wilhelm Grimm clarified moral ambiguities by deleting the ample references to premarital sex or pregnancy, and eliminating bawdy humor that was rampant in the

oral traditions (Tatar xliv). As the original choppy narration of the stories was smoothed, the stories took on a lyrical voice, which gave the tales their "crystalline fairy-tale style" (O'Neill) and flowed when read aloud. "By 1819, the date of the second edition," writes Tatar, "the collection had received more than a face-lift. Eighteen tales had been so heavily revised, redacted, and rescripted that they were almost unrecognizable" (Tatar xlvi-xlvii).

As the Grimms revised the tales, the number of dead mothers grew from nine in the first edition to fourteen by the seventh (and final) edition. "Enshrining the stepmother as villain brings with it the added advantage of exonerating both biological parents from blame for the miserable conditions at home" (Tatar 155). Nathalie Blaha-Peillex's dissertation, "Mütter Und Anti-Mütter In Den Märchen Der Brüder Grimm," examines sixty-four tales in which the feminine figure appears as what she calls "mother, anti-mother, or both." The now-dead biological mothers, she notes, were replaced with stepmothers. In the transformation from mother to stepmother, the dead mother characters were able to retain saintly, positive qualities befitting the "nineteenth century bourgeois construction of a cult of motherhood" (Schmiesing 347). "Whereas biological mothers are not punished [in the tales] for their misdeeds, stepmothers routinely are" (348). In the transformation of mother into stepmother, the antagonists became truly villainous (Grimm *Annotated 73)*. Whether it was conscious or not, the stepmothers in the Grimms tales are family outsiders whose cruelty and abuse of their innocent heroes and heroines serve to move the tales' plots forward.

"The brothers saw their own collection as a model, one that would inspire similar efforts to capture the lost poetry of other cultures," and though they sought to preserve and herald the values of the Hessian region, the Grimms acknowledged their project's deep international roots (Grimm *Annotated* xliv). As gatherers of folklore, Jacob and Wilhelm interviewed local residents

and travelers who passed through their region, and O'Neill found that in their forty or so different sources, a handful of the most famous tales were rather non-regional in origin. "Cinderella," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Snow White," and "Sleeping Beauty" are all easily traced to France, where Charles Perrault had published *Contes de ma mère l'Oye*, or *Tales of My Mother Goose*, a century earlier (O'Neill). But even Perrault's stories weren't necessarily French in origin. Tatar writes that "*Walt Disney's* Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (1937) has so overshadowed other versions of the story that it is easy to forget that the tale is widely disseminated across a variety of cultures" (247). The details of "Snow White" vary from region to region, but the conflict between the innocent heroine and the narcissistic stepmother/mother figure is central to them all. Tatar notes, "The struggle between Snow White and the wicked queen so dominates the psychological landscape of this fairy tale that a landmark book of feminist literary criticism proposed renaming the story 'Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother' (Grimm *Annotated* 248). Of all the tales, Tatar writes that "Cinderella" perhaps travelled the furthest, from a Scottish version called "Rashin Coatie," to the oldest-known "Cinderella" from China around A.D. 850. Tatar writes, "Few fairy tales have enjoyed the rich literary, cinematic, and musical afterlife of 'Cinderella'" (120-121). Perhaps this is why Cinderella's stepmother appears to hold the strongest sway.

What this reveals is that though many fault the Grimms, the cold-blooded stepmother figure can be found before and beyond their particular body of folktales. Patricia A. Watson notes in the introduction to her book, *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny and Reality,* that the prominence of the cruel stepmother character in ancient literature led scholars to "regard the malevolence of stepmothers as a peculiarly Roman obsession," and that "malign stepmothers are by no means absent from Greek literature" (2). The trope continued and crossed the Atlantic. In *I*

Could Not Call Her Mother: The Stepmother in American Popular Culture, Leslie Lindenauer notes that in Revolutionary times, "the evil stepmother" was commonly used by both the American colonies and England to describe the once-mother country. In London, the *Public Ledger* wrote, "instead of looking on [the colonies] with the jealous eye of a Step-mother, consider them as a valuable and immediate part of ourselves." South Carolinian politician William Henry Drayton wrote of England, "But Alas! Instead of Parental tenderness, we experience a Step-mother's severity – instead of justice, we receive marks of the most unfeeling gratitude!" (9).

Regardless of the wicked stepmother's origin, once the Grimms collected the stories, sharpened their literary and Christian qualities, and morphed the unpalatable mothers into once-removed wicked stepmothers, the stories fell somewhere between the oral and the literary tale, and we inherited a collection of well-crafted tales, not necessarily unique to the German tradition, which were polished in such a way as to have long-standing appeal. (Acocella). The material of these tales is elegant, and easily retold. The cultural references, the clothing, and the locales in each tale are fairly non-specific, and therefore relatable to audiences across cultures. The characters are simplistic and morally unambiguous, which has led generations of parents to teach these stories to their children. The seven revised editions of *Children's Stories and Household Tales* published in Wilhelm's lifetime have led to countless translations and retellings since, carrying many of the stories over to lasting fame (Grimm *Annotated* xvi). And so, the fact remains that although the Grimms did not invent the wicked stepmother, they strengthened her stamina (73). After all this, the question comes: will the stepmother's fate be forever relegated to the role of cruel witch?

Among her other qualities, the "wicked stepmother" conjures a sense of loss: loss of the biological mother, loss of home, loss of innocence. The English prefix "step" used in these second-family relationships derives, in fact, from an indication of loss. The Old English prefix *steop-* was found in the word *steopcild*, stepchild, which meant "orphan." *Steop-* comes from the word, *astiepan*/*bestiepan*, which meant "bereave." Although nowadays stepparents and stepchildren are often a consequence of divorce, for much of history they were part of an arrangement which resulted from death. A stepparent was someone who became a mother or father to a bereaved child, to an orphan. Looking at the etymology, it is not surprising that the wicked stepmother is the chaperon for so much sadness. Her very title is imbued with loss.

In this light, the wicked stepmother's endurance is not always considered injurious. In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, renowned Freudian psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim writes:

> In order to master the psychological problems of growing up—overcoming narcissistic disappointments, oedipal dilemmas, sibling rivalries; becoming able to relinquish childhood dependencies; gaining a feeling of selfhood and of self-worth, and a sense of moral obligation—a child needs to understand what is going on within his conscious self so that he can also cope with that which goes on in his unconscious.

Bettelheim posits that the stories and daydreams of fairy tales help children find structure from which they can understand the losses and changes that stem from real-life events. Through the tales, a child learns coping mechanisms, not through rational understanding of his or her feelings and actions, but by "ruminating, rearranging, and fantasizing" about elements in the fairy tales that correspond to elements in life. "It is here that fairy tales have unequaled value,

because they offer new dimensions to the child's imagination which would be impossible for him to discover as truly on his own" (7). For example, in Bettleheim's analysis of "Hansel and Gretel," the fairy tale expresses real children's feelings of anxiety about starvation or abandonment by a parent. The story "gives body to the anxieties and learning tasks of the young child" (159-160). Of "Snow White," he explains that the stepmother only becomes jealous and murderous after the protagonist reaches puberty. This, he says, expresses the classic adolescent phenomenon in which the child subconsciously wishes to be rid of the parent, a desire which sparks immense guilt. To diffuse the guilt, fairy tales shift the dynamic so that it is the parents who try to rid themselves of their child (202-204). "When a story corresponds to how the child feels deep down—as no realistic narrative is likely to do—it attains an emotional quality of 'truth' for the child" (237).

In "Cinderella," although the text centers primarily on the sibling rivalry between the heroine and her stepsisters, it is the relationship with the stepmother that is at the forefront of our cultural memory. Bettelheim offers this perspective on the heroine's journey:

> The difference between what happens to the stepsisters who remain tied to their "good parents" without inner development, and the hardships and significant developments Cinderella has to undergo when her original good parents are replaced by step-parents, permits every child and parent to understand that, in the child's best interests, for a time he needs to see even the best of parents as rejecting and demanding "step"-parents. If "Cinderella" makes an impression on parents, it can help them accept that as an inescapable step in their child's development toward true maturity, they must seem for a time to have turned into bad parents (276).

From the Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, the fantastical events of the fairy tales highlight real human emotions. However ghastly in detail, this perspective appreciates the vivid imagery that offers tangible expression to the vague or overwhelming emotions that arise from events in life. Interpreted thus, fairy tales serve to depict life's birth, maturation, rivalry, differentiation, and death experiences, and aid a child in understanding them.

The Jungian perspective looks at fairy tales, dreams, and life symbolically and through the concept of archetypes. An archetype is "a universal and recurring image, pattern, or motif representing a typical human experience" (Leonard). Fairy tales are brief stories without reflection or narrator, and so Jungian theorists look at them as symbolic expressions of ancient psychological wisdom. Jungian analyst Jutta von Buchholtz says, "We try to glean the underlying messages from the personal or collective unconscious as it might relate to the individuation process." The cartoon-like outlines of fairy tales' archetypal characters offer a framework for deeper meaning (5-8).

Looking at the characters from this archetypal standpoint, Snow White and her antagonistic wicked stepmother can be interpreted as light and shadow sides of the feminine psyche. The two are connected by their mutual need to be young and beautiful. Their pursuit of beauty and agelessness is set against the tale's march of time, depicted symbolically as seasons passing and cycles ending (von Buchholtz 10). As fairy-tale-inspired novelist Stephanie Alexander writes, "In the case of female beauty, young is it, and always has been [but] her worth was beyond her control, tied up in genetics, ease of life, and time itself" (Alexander). The relationship between Snow White and the wicked stepmother can be seen as an allegory of female maturation and maternal jealousy in its most pathological form (von Buchholtz 8). In this perspective, the so-called negative feminine can be examined as an element of universal human

feelings, behavior, and responses. Throughout *The Stepmother in Fairytales: Bereavement and the Feminine Shadow,* Jungian author Jacqueline Schectman uses the term "Stepmother" as representative of the shadow feminine archetype. She maintains that every person has the "Stepmother" in their psyche, and that this aspect emerges whenever punishing, withholding aspects arise and the "Good mother" aspects retreat (80). In a blog on archetypes, Isa Ritchie writes:

> [In] society the repression of femininity has led to the demonisation of strong women. Strong women are often discriminated against. Female politicians, prominent feminists, and leaders are judged on their appearance and personality, their very femininity is called into question time and time again. They are shaped into the evil step-mother or the witch, representing, in the outside world, this part of the psyche that is so difficult to manage.

In other words, according to Jungian archetypal theory, fairy tale characters each represent aspects of the full human experience, and the stepmother is simply one aspect of every human. By examining the stepmother role in the folk tales, and asking questions about her stories, Schectman brings the archetypal Stepmother out of her "global, formless shadow" and into an image with a history and a future (102).

The fairy tales' persistence has attracted all sorts of analysis from political (the demonization of the "other") to feminist (passive girl-heroes and wicked women) to Freudian (they help us adjust) to Jungian (archetypes) (Acocella). Through the lens of these theories, some of the tropes and scenarios can be seen as positively serving audiences of all ages. However, how do these stories affect real-life stepmothers? What is at stake for stepmothers, their spouses, and their families? As Laythe notes in "The Wicked Stepmother?: The Edna Mumbulo Case of

1930," by the time she was brought to trial, "Edna was already, whether consciously or unconsciously, being linked to the 'evil stepmother' stereotype" (10). Although most stepmothers do not suffer the ordeal of Edna Mumbulo, the perpetuation of the negative stereotype continues to cast a shadow on stepmothers who, as stepfamily expert Wednesday Martin says, are "by and large the most powerless and vulnerable members of the stepfamily system" (*Profiling*). A counter-narrative is needed to bring balance to this lopsided trope. As Schectman writes, "A woman freed from the pull of both poles of the…archetype can simply be a person, a woman who is sometimes called upon to mother, sometimes not" (104).

Writers with stepfamilies, in particular those who are stepmothers, grapple with the trope in various ways. In her personal essay, "The Evil Stepmom," stepmother and transmedia storytelling pioneer Maureen McHugh writes, "We joke about me being the evil stepmother. In fact, the joke is that I am the Nazi Evil Stepmother From Hell. It dispels tension to say it out loud…." In her essay, McHugh attempts to integrate what she knows about herself (that she is not evil) with what she knows about stepmothers (that they are). The essay never quite resolves the issue, because the two dichotomies cannot be fused. In the end, McHugh simply writes, "Speaking from the land of the stepparent, I tell you, this business of being evil is hard. It is very hard."

In stepmother Roxana Robinson's essay "Wicked," she associates the villainous stepmother with another Grimm villain: the wolf. Set as a lamentation for the frayed relationship she has with her now-grown stepdaughter, Robinson wrestles with her own light and shadow aspects, wondering how she, a nurturing woman, became a villain in the eyes of her stepdaughter:

I was perfectly happy to become a stepmother, though I was troubled by the

reputation. In all the stories, the stepmother is always wicked, always cruel to

children. Wolves are cruel, too, but not wicked. Wolves are the natural enemies of

children, and they're meant to be savage. Widowed kings and poor woodcutters

don't marry wolves and ask them to raise their children. They marry women, the

natural protectors of children, who are meant to be warm and maternal. So why

was it that women who became stepmothers acted like wolves? (118)

Throughout this essay, Robinson battles with the fractured concept that a woman, "the

natural protector of children," could become the enemy. She uses the framework of "Cinderella"

to help understand the emotional demise that led her from a whole-hearted engagement in raising

her stepdaughter to a situation in which the two barely speak.

[The stepdaughter] disregards your rules because they are not her mother's…

You have no ally here, you have no choice. You are alone on this rocky slope.

Your mountain fastness, in fact your entire domain, perhaps even your life as a

wife, is under attack. You have no choice. Deep in your throat, you growl. You

lift your black lip. You show your savage teeth (124).

As in the fairy tales, simply because they are outsiders who enter already-established

family units, real life stepmothers "disturb the harmony among blood relations" (*Hard Facts*

142). However, the "wicked" narrative eclipses the reality of what comes from that disturbance.

Stepmothers, all too cognizant of their alien status in the family, experience both challenges and

rewards from their unique position of mothering another mother's child. As a parent in the

household who is neither mother nor father, they encounter particular realities—both positive

and negative—that the other parents cannot. Stepmothers are outsiders coming in, and as such,

their interactions and emotional connection with the child are exclusive to their singular relationship.

In her book *Stepmonster*, Wednesday Martin reports that over 70% of partnerships between childless women and men who already have children will fail (1). In her three-decades-long study of 1,400 families, psychologist Dr. E. Mavis Hetherington found that while children frequently come to appreciate having a stepfather, "the situation with stepmothers is more difficult and stepchild resentment is more intense." Particular challenges include societal expectations on women and lack of emotional support from the spouse (4). In addition, stepmothers contend with a lack of role clarity, unclear expectations, shortage of realistic role models, and cultural preferences for first-family models (Hoffman). Researcher Allison Christian argues that, particularly, the social stigma that comes from the perpetuation of the wicked myth has significant effects on stepmothers' self-esteem and the whole family relationship. Christian states that the stereotype "continues to dominate society's thinking about stepmothers" (27). She criticizes the pervasive narrative that says that "if the stepmother and daughter do not get along, she must by default be a wicked stepmother" (29).

Like other groups with deeply-entrenched cultural narratives, stepmothers and their families need a counter-narrative. Wednesday Martin suggests that "exploring the issue of how children can threaten and stress a marriage, rather than how a remarriage may affect a child, is a reframing many are likely to find unsettling" (6). Yet, acknowledging stepmother realities—that stepchildren affect a remarriage, that society demands stepmothers to be simultaneously nurturing but not-the-mother, that the "wicked" stereotype is lurking in society's psyche, and that, in the Jungian sense, all family members carry both the "Stepmother" and the "Good mother" aspects—can help individuals and families better understand the real experiences of

women with stepchildren. The presence of the wicked stepmother trope in headlines and personal anecdotes shows its tenacity, but counter-stories reveal the social realities.

In the critical essay "Contesting the Myth of the 'Wicked Stepmother': Narrative Analysis of an Online Stepfamily Support Group," Allison Christian examines how an online stepmother support group addressed the myth and stigma associated with the stepmother role. "'There can be little doubt that hearing fairy tales about wicked stepmothers would negatively color young children's images of them' [from Claxton-Oldfield's "Deconstructing the myth of the wicked stepparent. *Marriage and Family Review*, 20, 51-58]. Unfortunately, most modern fairy tales—now better known as movies—do not offer much more promising portrayals of stepmothers." In her study, Christian found that in order to deal with the difficulties faced as a result of the stigma (27-28), the stepmothers in her group naturally utilized counter-narrative to assuage their struggle. While each of the stepmothers' personal challenges fell under different topic categories, the two counter-narrative themes that emerged were "biological mother as incompetent or mentally unstable" and "stepmother as martyr" (36). Humans gravitate toward sharply polarized, distinct concepts. The nature of binary opposition is that we only understand "wicked" because we understand "good." By pitting the stepmother against the biological mother, the stepmothers created a binary opposition which moved the biological mother to the "wicked" role and therefore allowed the stepmother to hold the place of "good" (38-40). Christian writes:

> The narratives illustrate that [the stepmothers] have taken what is familiar to them (the position of being marked as the 'wicked stepmother') and projected this image onto the biological mother…. Having created the biological mother in their

place as the 'wicked' one, the second stage of the narratives is for the stepmothers

to then place themselves on the 'good' pole of the binary (39).

Although reductionist in its perpetuation of the Us/Them dichotomy (41), the binary

opposition counter-narrative is an effort to neutralize the stepmothers' own negative reputation

that comes from the myth. Christian writes,

The myth of the 'wicked stepmother' is…the result of intent on the part of the

hegemonic group to make its arbitrary construction seem 'natural'. To naturalize

the 'wicked stepmother' idea is to make it seem as though it is the right way to

think about stepmothers; that anything else (i.e., a nice, loving stepmother) is,

therefore, abnormal or even unnatural.

Drawing from an unrelated stepmother support group study, Zach Addison, MSW student

researcher at the University of North Carolina, concurs that "the stepmother appears as a figure

of predominantly negative associations" and that the "lack of alternative stories creates role

strain and cognitive tension" (3). He argues that those belonging to a stereotyped group tend to

both suppress their negative feelings and overcompensate for the negative narrative by taking on

greater responsibilities which leads to anxiety and depression. He calls for narrative therapy to

provide "a frame for lived experience," provide insight into the cultural messages that hinder

growth, and destabilize the dominant story so that a new set of experiences can arise (5-11).

Clearly, there is a need for counter-narrative, but must it work in binary opposition, as in

Christian's study, and merely swap out "wicked" from the stepmother to the mother? Addison

argues that through humor and "a counter-stepmother story of caring, compassion, and

flexibility," a positive narrative can emerge for stepmothers, one that strengthens their stepfamily

life (17-23). Authentic counter-narratives that allow room for a stepmother's full experience—

the difficulties along with the joys, the imagined narratives along with the real—help lift the "invisible burden of fantasy" which stepmothers carry. Counter-narrative expressions fill the voids that come with the stepmother role (Hoffman).

The anthology *My Father Married Your Mother: Writers Talk about Stepparents, Stepchildren, and Everyone in Between* offers such counter-narratives. In her introduction, editor Anne Burt remembers taking her then-three-year-old daughter to a marionette performance of "Hansel and Gretel." In preparation, she warns her daughter that there would be a witch character in the story. Her daughter asks if the stepmother is a witch. Burt writes, "It's a logical question, given that in the fairy tale she loves and fears the most, *Snow White*, stepmother and witch are interchangeable." She explains to her daughter that not all stepmothers are evil, but then remembers that in "Hansel and Gretel," the show they were about to watch, the woodcutter's children are indeed sent off to starve in the forest by their stepmother. Burt then wonders about her fiancé's daughter, who is also three years old, and the relationship they will have when Burt becomes her stepmother and her own daughter becomes the stepsister (20).

> The task of becoming someone Delayna can trust seems Herculean; when she is afraid of evil stepmothers and stepsisters, she knows—and I know—that I am powerless to keep them at bay. And this is how I finally realize, on the brink of becoming a stepmother myself, that the myth of the blended family is a lie (21).

Understanding that she carried her own narrative about the wicked stepmother into the beginnings of her new relationship, Burt writes, "I need[ed] to look the Evil Stepmother right in the eye." Finding no brutally honest essays to offer real life stories, she reached out to writers, requesting literary essays "with no agenda other than telling the truth" (25). The result was *My Father Married Your Mother*, and it delightfully contains deeply honest—occasionally

mercilessly so—essays by all branches of the knotty stepfamily tree, hetero- and homosexual

marriages alike. The essays touch on many complicated formulations of second families,

including several essays written by children whose stepparents also contributed to the anthology.

The book contains pieces about stepparents, stepchildren, and stepsiblings; by children whose

parents remarried after divorce, and also after widowhood; by children who lost their stepparents

to a second divorce, and stepparents who lost their stepchildren; by parents whose spouses are

their children's stepparents; by adult children whose parents remarried later in life; and by the

three combinations of second-family remarriage, which include childless adults who marry

parents, parents who marry childless spouses, and parents who marry parents.

In a survey of the essays in *My Father Married Your Mother*, the wicked trope appears

alive and well. As Allison Christian found in her stepmother support group study, "it is necessary

for voices that had been marginalized to connect to hegemonic traditions as a way to somehow

free themselves from its power" (42). It was only by first embracing the myth that the

marginalized stepmothers in Christian's study were then able to reassign the roles. Like in the

study, the difference between the wicked trope in *My Father* and the classic fairy tales is that in

their connection with the narrative, the essayists grapple with it, dismantle it, reassign it, or

entirely sidestep it. In "Step Shock," stepmother Candy J. Cooper writes, "Wicked Stepmother

began to appear on my shoulder, and I brushed her away like dandruff" (237). Recognizing that

the truncated fairy tale narratives neither give the stepmother's background prior to her entrance

into the protagonist's family, nor chronicle the story that occurs after the "happily ever after,"

Barbara Kingsolver writes, "I understood the Prince Charming Theory of Marriage…I did not

completely understand that another whole story *begins* there, and no fairy tale prepared me"

(267). After all, once the heroine grows up and marries her prince, who is to say their marriage is

not later annulled? Whose stepmother does Cinderella become? By confronting the narrative, the grey areas between good and wicked rise to the surface.

In his essay "On Having a Stepmother Who Loves Opera," stepson Andrew Solomon gets to the very heart of the stepmother's predicament. Reflecting on being an adult child when his widowed father remarried, he writes, "I have always been fascinated by difficult loves, and stepmothers, as the fairy tales all tell, are inherently a challenge" (57-60).

Regardless of whoever she was before, a woman who accepts the role of stepmother becomes a difficult love, and there are many reasons for the stepmother's complex position. In her article "Why is Stepmothering More Difficult Than Stepfathering?" Rose Marie Hoffman writes, "Expectations held by the stepmother and by the stepchildren are more likely to be either overly hopeful or overly negative rather than realistic."

> Unguided by norms, role clarity, or realistic expectations, the stepmother works to "make up for the past" experiences of the stepchildren, only to come to the awareness that she is overwhelmed, frustrated, and less committed to them than she believes she should be. In turn, her stepchild(ren) may react to her frustration, recoiling from their own thwarted fantasies and unmet expectations (Hoffman).

In her essay, "Nature's Perfect Blend: A Work in Progress," stepmother Lizabeth Kingsley ruminates on this nebulous territory:

> I make much of this up as I go:…how to maintain trust among stepchildren who may still be figuring me out; …how to strengthen my rubber exterior so the disrespect lobbed at me by my kids bounces off; how to know when to advocate for us as a family and when to back off if one of us doesn't feel quite on board

with that designation; and how to get out of my head and put my relationship

first… (Kingsley 37).

One of the problems is that there are very few role models to which stepmothers and

children can turn for meaningful advice. Hoffman writes, "[T]he few models that do exist are

often restricted to popular fairy tales where the relationship between the stepmother and

stepchild is characterized by an innocent child hated and abused by a 'wicked' stepmother." Add

to this the lack of genetic ties between the child and the stepmother, and the many lost formative

years to create the natural loving bonds between infant and parent. In addition, a parent's death

or the unraveling of a marriage often means that the stepmother frequently walks into a

household still reverberating from a previous disaster. In her essay, "Who Will This Be to Me,"

stepmother Betsy Graziani Fasbinder writes about how she and her seven-year-old stepson piece

together a new family tree in anticipation of her marriage to his widowed father. She wonders,

"Perhaps my family was to be the dowry I'd bring to this little boy who had lost so much." When

he tries calling her *mom* she realizes, "This son of the man I loved was becoming my son," but

soon the boy returns to calling her *Betsy*, and Fasbinder feels shamed and disappointed. "Moms

die, you know," her stepson later says. "I think it's maybe safer if you're just Betsy" (8-10).

Commonly, whether from death or divorce, the child struggles with mixed feelings

between the biological mother and the stepmother (Hoffman). Wednesday Martin writes that

many stepchildren feel loyalty binds to their mothers, and feel tremendously conflicted in their

affection towards the stepmother (Martin *Real Reason*). This scenario is one of the main plot

points in the 1998 film *Stepmom*. In the film, speaking about the stepmother, the daughter asks

her mom, "Mom, if you want me to hate her, I will."

Often, a stepchild who "hates" stepmom feels that in doing so she is expressing

solidarity with her mother. If mom would explicitly give her permission to like

her stepmother, and let her know that being nasty to stepmom is not an option, the

behavior, and the resentment it stems from, would likely vanish (Martin *Why It's*

Easier).

Mother and stepmother Cynthia Whitcomb's essay "It's a Mom Thing" is about

understanding the loyalty conflicts that children feel, but also about the pain that the stepmother

feels when the stepchild brushes her off, and how, for stepparents, sometimes love is an act of

fake-it-till-you-make-it. She writes, "Sam was named for his mom, was a redhead like her and

had gotten the message, stated or subliminal, that he'd better be loyal to his one and only

mother… so an invisible line was drawn in the sand between Sam and me. One I was determined

to obliterate" (120). After many conflicts with four-year-old Sam, she writes,

I needed to find a way to love Sam like I did the other three kids. I wanted to feel

love. To be filled with it like Biblical grace. But we can't control our feelings.

They just come and go with minds of their own…

And [then] I felt it. I choked up and loved the hell out of that little boy. Here's the

thing about love. It's a verb, not an emotion. You love as an action. You just do it.

And when you do, the feeling will follow…

Not long after that night Sam started calling me "mom." We still had our ups and

downs, but we were thereafter on hugging terms and having two moms started to

seem like the most normal thing in the world (122-124).

Like Whitcomb, the stepmother is often caught between her affection for the child she

mothers and the fact that she is not biologically the mother. "I had taken to calling my stepchild,

quite simply, my daughter, because honestly, I don't make a separation in my mind or my heart, nor does her father, so why is it anyone's business in casual conversation?" writes stepmother Jude Callirgos in her Huffington Post blog. C.S. O'Cinneide, a mother who remarried when her two children were young, explains some of the difficulty with step-titles:

> "[They] are words that come with emotional and stereotypical baggage that can weigh heavy around the necks of a blended family. Blame pop culture or bad breakups or Disney, but the fact is the stigma remains…
>
> The 'step' is not diminutive, it is divine. For these are the roles that we play not because we are expected to, or because we have to, but because we choose to out of love, out of loyalty" (44).

Unlike Fasbinder's scenario in which she married a widow, part of the difficulty for many stepmothers is not just the dynamics with the stepchild, but the dynamics with the child's other parent. It is children, not marriage, that truly cement the "til death do us part" line of the marriage vows. When a partner comes with kids, the ex-spouse who comes as part of the package is an entirely unique aspect of the relationship. In "Circling the Sacred Fire," Melanie Mock writes about the complications of sharing the parenting responsibilities with her partner's ex.

> Rearranging plans to fit an every-other-weekend custody schedule. Stepping into well entrenched family traditions that were baffling and mysterious to me. Figuring out whether to sit near (or far) from ex-spouses at ball games and recitals. Splitting holiday time and vacations and rites of passage with another woman I had nothing in common with, and about whom I knew nothing. Nothing,

that is, except that she has a history with my spouse, and that together they bore

and raised the two children (Mock 62).

The baffling family traditions are tricky to navigate, but divergent household rules and values are perhaps more so. In her essay "Stone Soup," Kingsolver uses the term "bi-nuclear" in response to the first-family term for a nuclear family. For many, bi-nuclear might conjure the image of a bi-solar system in which satellite planets circle between two suns, and better describes the notion of a child orbiting around and between two parenting households (Kingsolver 274). The exposure to two households' different values can be richly rewarding for a child's upbringing, but it can also add distress to the stepmother's relationships in the family. In circumstances where communication between the biological mother and father is strained, the stepmother is often caught in the middle as the child finds the gaps and learns to game the system. Wednesday Martin writes, "A stepmother who brings such behavior to light with the intent of helping a stepchild become a more honorable and trustworthy person is likely to incite fireworks rather than change." However, she adds, "If cooperative co-parenting is the ideal, parallel parenting is the norm." Researchers have found that with parallel parenting, rules and values may vary between the two households, but that children are remarkably adaptive (Martin *Stepmother* 160-161). In a bi-nuclear family, children have a sense of not just two sets of rules, but two sets of parents, and tend to adjust exceptionally well.

For the many real-life families that do not fall into the nuclear-framework, we need counter-narratives to balance the lopsided stereotype, to console these underappreciated partners who step in mid-rearing to help raise the children, and to provide inspiration for how others work their way through the many complicated emotions and scenarios that come with second families. Many of the personal essays quoted here were gathered by editor, essayist, and family therapist

Samantha Waltz for *Blended,* a newly released anthology. Like Anne Burt's work with *My Father Married Your Mother,* Waltz collected these essays because she is a stepmother in search of a counter-narrative to the wicked trope. She compiled these stories in the hopes of showing a model for "creating order and peace out of a tangle of step relationships," and for offering consolation when order and peace is not possible (Waltz xvi).

In *Blended*'s foreword, Ariel Gore writes, "In my family, we don't have children who are reared in one household by their two biological parents. It's just not the way we do things" (Waltz xvii). To say that nuclear is the only norm in our contemporary culture ignores the fact that many variations on the family theme have been common practice throughout the world for much of history. That stepmothers have been demonized, or biological mothers heralded, or first-families valorized is a fact of particular literary or cultural values reflecting a time and place. There is validity, perhaps, in examining the old Grimm tales and the rest of their ilk to find consolation in their reflection or symbolic depictions of the natural phases and patterns of life. Those tales are not going anywhere; they will continue to be re-told, re-imagined, re-examined. However, stepmothers and their families can find their own consolation in the emergence of contemporary narratives that include all the many varieties of families, and the many ways to be a parent. As Ariel Gore writes in *Blended*:

> So we learn as we go. We make mistakes, and try to imagine what it's like to stand in each other's shoes. New commitments are fragile, exciting, terrifying. Old bonds are complicated. And as our love for each other flows on in all its changing forms—easy and tense—we grow up. And that's the goal with all of this, isn't it? Growing up and learning to see and accept our families for what they

are rather than getting stuck in our individual and preconceived ideas about what

"family" should be like (Waltz xx).

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