



# The Merry Spinster: Tales of Everyday Horror

*Mallory Ortberg*

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## The Merry Spinster: Tales of Everyday Horror Mallory Ortberg

From Mallory Ortberg comes a collection of darkly mischievous stories based on classic fairy tales. Adapted from her beloved "Children's Stories Made Horrific" series, *The Merry Spinster* takes up the trademark wit that endeared Ortberg to readers of both *The Toast* and her best-selling debut *Texts from Jane Eyre*. The feature became among the most popular on the site, with each entry bringing in tens of thousands of views, as the stories proved a perfect vehicle for Ortberg's eye for deconstruction and destabilization. Sinister and inviting, familiar and alien all at the same time, *The Merry Spinster* updates traditional children's stories and fairy tales with elements of psychological horror, emotional clarity, and a keen sense of feminist mischief.

Readers of *The Toast* will instantly recognize Ortberg's boisterous good humor and uber-nerd swagger: those new to Ortberg's oeuvre will delight in her unique spin on fiction, where something a bit mischievous and unsettling is always at work just beneath the surface.

Unflinching faithfulness to its beloved source material, *The Merry Spinster* also illuminates the unsuspected, and frequently, alarming emotional complexities at play in the stories we tell ourselves, and each other, as we tuck ourselves in for the night.

Bedtime will never be the same.

## The Merry Spinster: Tales of Everyday Horror Details

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Author : Mallory Ortberg

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# From Reader Review The Merry Spinster: Tales of Everyday Horror for online ebook

## Charlie Anders says

I blurbed this book, so just to add to what I already said ---- this is really something special, even after the other fairytale retellings I've read lately. I wasn't really prepared for quite how creepy and intense, and endlessly inventive, this book is. Unsettling and powerful, and it'll totally make you look at the stories that formed us in a whole new way.

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## ❀?Rory?❀ says

4 Stars! Review to follow.

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## Tiff (fictionaltiff) says

Mallory Ortberg, author of Texts From Jane Eyre, has created another wonderfully unique book. This compilation of short stories retelling a variety of everyone's most beloved fairy and folk tales is not one the reader will soon forget.

The main reason I would love a hard copy of this book and perceive it as a valuable read is I like that this book changes my perspective on classic stories. I will never think of The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Cinderella, and the other classic stories the author reinvents, the same way again. Ortberg gives her horror twist on stories, such as The Velveteen Rabbit, and also includes with that, some gender-neutral characters (The Frog Prince) and feminist scenarios (Beauty and the Beast, Little Mermaid, The Six Swans, etc.), where the damsel in distress pretty much just kills everyone (not really -- well...).

If you have a dark sense of humor, you will get a kick out of this book. If you don't (which I don't think I do -- but every avid reader gets used to reading gory and horror scenes, right? Have I become immune?), you'll probably enjoy this because of the different perspective the book provides.

I can't leave this review without a complaint because I'm sure you're wondering (okay, maybe not, but here I go anyway) why only the four stars? This story sounds amazing, so why isn't it a five-star read? Mallory Ortberg is a terrific writer and I thoroughly enjoyed each short story -- which is why I'm really upset that each story was so short. Some parts lacked enough detail and I had to read it a few times to make sure I understood what was happening. I didn't want each story to end. I think that each story could have been elaborated more and maybe made into a series of short books instead of just compiling them into stories with not enough story. I understand it fits with the theme of keeping them like the children's versions, but still, some parts were left wanting.

Otherwise, a great read and will recommend this as a fun read.

I received this as an ARC from NetGalley. Thank you, NetGalley!

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## **Jaksen says**

I read the first few, skimmed the rest. I don't get any of it. Seems written by a writer who luxuriates in her own overblown cleverness.

I don't mean to be unnecessarily cruel in my review, and the writing itself is superb. That is, how one word meets the next; how metaphors fly out like gnats, biting and surprising you; how carefully each story is composed; and even, how repetition of phrases create a sort of innate rhythm to each tale. Yep, this writer can write.

But the stories are obtuse, strange, contorted - and not in the sense I, a horror and mystery reader - usually like. I must also add I was a great reader of fairy tales in my younger years - up and through my twenties. I read the red, green, blue, etc., fairy tale books and often had to justify borrowing them from the local library. (My mother thought it was nuts I loved these books.)

But these short tales, obviously the black sheep offshoots of 'regular' folk and fairy tales, are not to my fancy. My mind was everywhere as I read them - I had to concentrate to keep on reading.

So, two stars, both for skill in the actual writing.

I won this book through Goodreads, which I fully support and appreciate.

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## **BAM The Bibliomaniac says**

Netgalley #56

Many thanks go to Mallory Ortberg, Holt Paperback, and Netgalley for the free copy of this book in exchange for my unbiased review.

I admit it. I have a soft spot for fairy tale retellings. Ortberg was definitely original here. She melded two or more tales, nursery rhymes, prayers, and ballads to create one-of-a-kind stories with a cynical twist. If anyone has difficulty identifying what's being used, there is a table at the end. I think my favorite was "The Wedding Party", which read like a first rate British sitcom. It makes me want to read some chick lit by Ortberg. It would be quite good I'm sure similar to Kinsella but much more snarky. I just loved this book. It's a quick read, really entertaining and clever. I loved how she gained inspiration. Can't wait for her next work!

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## **Oriana says**

Oh Mallory, oh Daniel Mallory, oh my goodness gracious how I adore you.

This book tho... I don't know. It is incredibly well done, but that is not at all the same as saying I enjoyed it.

Each tale starts out familiar, like a song you love redone in a minor key — the mermaid who trades her voice for legs, the king who banishes his sons, the put-upon stepsister who goes to live with a beast-creature — but quickly they twist and wrench. Each unfurls with a sickly sweet beauty and a pitch-perfect fairytale tone, but it's impossible to ignore the oily, crawly dread roiling your stomach as they all lurch into a new kind of deeply, deeply disturbing darkness. What terrors will the stuffed rabbit visit upon the sweaty little boy who clutches him too tightly at night? What horrors will the muted, gangly-legged former mermaid cause for her dehumanizing aggro prince and his blushing airhead bride? You want to know, but you also kind of really, really don't.

I don't know how to rate or really even review a book like this, which is beautiful and strange and horrible horrible horrible. It's hauntingly lovely but oh god, most of the time I hated it. There is only so much darkness I can bear, and this proffers about twice that. So much bloodletting, so much sorrow, so much arch potent destruction, of people and places and love and trust and hope. So much rending of flesh and plucking out of eyes. So much grief and tragedy. So many new kinds of devastation and despair. I could not have been more relieved to be finished with it.

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### Trin says

I'm sad to say I was very disappointed by this. Fairytale retellings are difficult, because they've just been done so many times before (Atwood, Carter, Donoghue, Gaiman...); still, I sort of hoped that if anyone could pull them off, it would be Ortberg, whose humorous writings and sharp takes on literature have always amused me a great deal. He does get in some very funny lines here and there in this collection, but overall, the ideas just didn't seem that creative or new. The writing felt rather self-conscious. And frankly...it was just an unpleasant, grimdark sort of read -- without being *clever* in a way that a) I was expecting and b) would, for me, make up for that.

Like, there are at least three lengthy stories all about gaslighting -- none of which really *said* anything about gaslighting; they merely depicted it. It's 2018: I get enough of that "everyday horror" already, thanks.

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### Melki says

**"Had my own brothers lived," the king said, "they should certainly have tried to harm our own children and stifle our peace." His own brothers, however, had not lived. It was an important task of kingship, determining when brothers and sons were no longer necessary.**

I was really looking forward to this collection of fairy tale retellings, but it proved to be a something of a let down. Ortberg's versions are somber and bleak, but really no darker than the original stories. Perhaps going grimmer was never the author's intention, but that *was* my expectation, and I was disappointed.

I liked three of the eleven tales, but all of them are already fading from memory. I thought the first story in the collection, *The Daughter Cells*, was the best of the lot, but any tale about carnivorous mermaids has the power to turn me into a quivering bowlful of algae. Perhaps the most unusual element to Ortberg's stories was the fluid sexual identities of some of the characters - male princesses, and daughters named Paul.

There really *is* a lot of talent on display here, and in the future, I'd like to read something that is not based on another's ideas, but created solely from the author's imagination

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### **thefourthvine says**

I am definitely not the right audience for this book. I read this on easy mode, skipping two stories that were mostly about animals (and I should have skipped the third, but I didn't realize in time), and the book still left me feeling slimed and poked in bruised places. It's just grim, unrelentingly grim, unrelentingly saying, "Hey, did you know there are awful things in the world? There are! And they are so very, very awful." Many of the stories cover the same (grim) territory, and some of them have no resolution, and I finished most of them sort of regretting I'd read them. (The two exceptions were "Daughter Cells" and "The Six Boy-Coffins.")

I do like fairytale fic, and that's what these stories are, but I don't like one-note stories, let alone one-note collections — and I really don't like it when that one note is a long, sustained moan of pain. I think I might have liked at least half of these stories if I'd encountered them mixed with other kinds of stories, or on their own, but all together they were at least 12 times too much.

But! If you like grimdark and you like fairytales, this is definitely the collection for you. It's just so very very much not for me.

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### **Terry says**

With sorrowful honesty, closer to 2.5 stars. I adore Ortberg, and as a mournful fan of the late, great The Toast, there was a special feverish rush holding Ortberg's book in my hands--it's like a part of The Toast became sentient and came over to my house for tea/drinks. It was thrilling and a tiny bit sad.

That being said... auuugh. I love Ortberg turning fairy tales on their heads. I love the playing with gender and history and narrative and...everything he's doing. Still, my personal reading experience felt a bit like I was being held at arm's length: I felt like I needed a much better education in both fairy tales and religion to truly grok every story. There's an archness to some of them that feels like Ortberg is making *himself* crack up enormously, but I'm somehow missing the joke. (I also (reluctantly) feel a few of the stories which I recognize from their first forays on The Toast worked better in a much shorter format.) But to criticize this book as a whole feels like a total betrayal! It hurts to say anything even remotely faintly, negative. The failings, I feel, are on my part.

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### **ak says**

Received an ARC for free blah blah whatever disclosure.

These stories are weird and queer and horrifying and are not going to be everyone's cup of tea but if you like Mallory's writing especially her "children's stories made horrifying" you won't be disappointed. Also The Rabbit is going to haunt me forever.

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## Sara Saif says

I'm officially tired of reading retelling anthologies. They get odder and weirder and more befuddling with each story and by the time I'm done I feel like banging my head against a wall.

I understand that part of it has to do with the fact that I have no ducking clue about the original stories themselves, most of the stories the writers pick to retell are not the usual disney ones. But then, how the heck am I supposed to get what part was retold and how cleverly it was done? A short summary of the originals beforehand would be nice. Like really, really nice. It would help me give a modicum of understanding and I wouldn't WTF all over the place. That's one.

The second thing is, even when I know the story, I'm still compelled to wtf all over the place because:

- a) the writers (all 8359385738 of them from the 4+ anthologies I've read so far) insist on sounding really poetic and mysterious and vague. It drives me nuts.
- b) it gets confusing with every word. I literally have no idea what is going on.
- c) it gets weirder beyond limit, hence the WTFing.

There were 11 stories in this and I found only 3 to my liking. The rest were *so* bad.

### **The Daughter Cells:**

Retelling of The Little Mermaid. I liked it. *By comparison*. But even this had some much weirdness thrown in it. I get that these are short stories and you add bits and pieces in it that you don't have the room to explain but *Lord in Heaven* I wanted to scream because these little 'bits' did not add mystique and intrigue to the story. They just added randomness and bizarreness, in a horrible and confounding way.

### **The Thankless Child:**

These were the sources and inspirations for this story:

- Cinderella
- King Lear, Shakespeare
- The Ladder of Divine Ascent
- Lorica of St. Patrick, Irish-Christian prayer
- The Divine Praises, Catholic Prayer
- Psalm 139

So you'll excuse me if I don't have the first shitting clue about what even happened here.

### **Fear Not: An Incident Log:**

Inspired by the Book ~~I've never read~~ of Genesis.

**The Six Coffins & The Rabbit:**

Now these two, these two were *good*. Properly horrifying and enthralling.

**The Merry Spinster:**

The absolute worst Beauty and the Beast retelling in the universe.

**The Wedding Party:**

**Some of Us Had Been Threatening Our Friend Mr. Toad:**

Psychopathic rodents. How, er, interesting.

**Cast Your Bread Upon the Waters:**

Psychopathic grannies...

**The Frog's Princess:**

LOL? And the next time someone calls a daughter a "he", I will find the nearest possible cliff and jump off from it.

**Good Fences Make Good Neighbors:**

Psychopathic neighbors...

In conclusion, I am so done.

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**Sarah Marie says**

The Merry Spinster: Tales for Everyday Horror by Mallory Ortberg

**3.75 stars**

Mallory Ortberg's short story collection focuses on the fairy tales of the past or beloved children stories and twists them into horrifying and shocking heights. I will admit not all the stories in this collection are perfect, but I can't remember the last time I read so many 5-star short stories in a collection. Ortberg is skilled at telling the story in a way familiar to the reader and then leaving the story with a mouth-dropping ending. The majority of the endings are not horrifying in the usual slasher film sense, but they are creepy in the same way that one knows that something far worse is to come, but it cuts off at just the right time Ortberg is strongest in this suite, but she is also weak in several other areas. I will review each story briefly to better clarify my exact meaning because overall, I think she is a strong writer, but she struggles to gain footing with certain stories and I think this is because she was trying a new approach to writing or a different writing style to emulate the original tales.



## Whimsical Writing Scale: 3.75

### *The Daughter Cells* – 3.5 stars

*“I can think of a dozen better things I could do with a soul.”*

The story of “The Little Mermaid” is famous and beloved by many ‘90s children who experienced the Disney adaptation. However, the original tale is quite dark and I would consider it to border on horror and it is definitely a tragedy. This story takes a delightful turn and the mermaid has more Ursula-like qualities that are quite bone-chilling. I love a good soulless mermaid. My biggest problem with this is that it takes a while to gain its footing. The narrative is a little wonky and it isn’t until the mermaid talks to the sea-witch that the story takes a dark turn and was able to capture my attention and make me excited about where it could end. It ends on a high note if you were wondering.

### *The Thankless Child* – 1.5 stars

*“To be grateful is to be wakeful and watchful.”*

This is a “Cinderella” retelling and I say that very loosely. There is a Godmother who acts as a deity for a household and if I’m being honest, this story is all over the place. I was struggling to follow the plot, the characters, and the point. The purpose of the overall story failed to go anywhere at the end and I was severely letdown. I dislike Cinderella anyway and I generally hold retellings at a higher standard, but this was not well-done. To say the least, I was underwhelmed.

### *Fear Not: An Incident Log* – 5 stars

*“The Voice of God, once heard, is not easily unheard.”*

This is a retelling of Genesis from the point of the view of the Lord’s Angel. The main focal point is the wrestling match that occurred between Jacob and the Lord’s Angel before he became Israel and the horror and guilt this angel feels even though he swears he feels nothing of the sort. I absolutely loved this story. The writing was superb and I felt like Ortberg’s writing style was shining through. I love Genesis in general, but I really liked seeing a new perspective on it. Highly recommend!

### *The Six-Boy Coffin* – >b>5 stars

*“If the next child you bear me is a girl, then let the six others die, so that our wealth need not be divided and that she alone may inherit the kingdom.”*

I was destined to love this story because it is based off of “The Six Swans” and my favorite fantasy novel is

Daughter of the Forest. This story is so very reminiscent of Sorcha's plight and her quest to restore her brothers back to humans while being forced into silence that it made me long to reread that wonderful story. However, this is a horror collection and while elements of "The Six Swans" are a little scary this took a delightfully satisfying turn with the last lines and the subtle shift in the main character. I was incredibly impressed by this one and I absolutely loved it.

#### *The Rabbit* – **5 stars**

*"Can you take the Real out of a boy, then? Can you take his heart into your own self and leave him stuffed with sawdust on the nursery floor in your place?"*

This is based off the beloved children's story "The Velveteen Rabbit" and it is hands down my favorite in this collection. "The Rabbit" is easily the most horrifying story in this collection as we see the rabbit's obsession with becoming Real and taking the life force from a child who loves him. The illnesses the boy faces are horrifying and my stomach was churning thinking about all the toys I've owned as a little girl. I was definitely left feeling scared and creeped out.

#### *The Merry Spinster* – **3.5 stars**

*"Everyone belongs to someone. You're not allowed to belong to yourself."*

This is a "Beauty and the Beast" retelling and focuses on a girl who is called Beauty for ironic reasons. She's plain, unremarkable and insights no inspiration in those around her. Her mother ends up being the one to have her daughter a captor of the Beast or Mr. Beale, a businessman of sorts. This was really promising, but the ending ruined it for me.

#### *The Wedding Party* – **1 star**

Honestly, I can't tell you what this story is about. They were talking about "The Goose Girl" at one point and I'm sure it is reminiscent of it in some aspect, but this was just bad. The main character was a complete misogynist who had a strong entitlement and I just couldn't with him as a narrator. I get that some men are just insufferable and that this was commentary, but I didn't get the story as a whole so I feel like the social commentary went over my head a bit since I couldn't see the whole scope of the narrative.

#### *Some of Us Had Been Threatening Mr. Toad* – **3.25 stars**

*"We'll rescue the poor, unhappy animal! We'll convert him—why, he'll be the most converted Toad there ever was by the time we're done with him."*

This was a unique story with a gruesome twist. It follows a bunch of your average sweet, fluffy talking animals and they are not happy with their friend Mr. Toad. See, Mr. Toad has been stealing things and feeling entitled and they have had enough, so what better way to show him that he needs to repent than by torturing him. The concept was scary, but it is a little off-putting to read from the perspective of this narrator. I feel like it was just easy to get confused about plot points and it took me out the story.

*Cast Your Bread Upon the Waters* – **4.5 stars**

*“For our story, it all led to sin in the end, and it all began with the listlessness and self-forgetting that comes not from God.”*

This story follows an old mother as she recounts her son’s greatest sin— falling in love with a siren. They struck a bargain that the mother was fine with, but when it started to impose upon her grandchildren she took matters into her own hands. Matthew 5:29-30 “If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.” The mother definitely stuck to this verse and it was scary.

*The Frog Princess* – **3 stars**

*“Beauty is a public good and you are responsible for it.”*

This is based off “The Princess and the Frog” and it is an interesting twist, but it is not horrifying by any means. In fact, it felt very out of place in this collection. It was scary or intimidating and I was confused by Ortberg’s pronoun usage because it is never explained or specified and this lead to me thinking there was another character when there wasn’t it. It was a bit of a mess.

*Good Fences Make Good Neighbors* – **2 stars**

This was a frustrating story. I honestly just can’t wrap my head around it being this collection because it wasn’t horrifying. It was frustrating. Human manipulation and being the brunt of someone’s tactics for power is scary, but it needed more.

Overall, *The Merry Spinster* is a strong collection. It has some fantastic tales, but it also has some complete busts. It’s your typical hit-and-miss short story collection. I just personally found there were more hits than misses for me.

**Cover Thoughts: I'm living for this cover. When I saw it on Netgalley I was blown away! I love it so much.**

*Thank you, Netgalley and Holt Paperbacks, for providing me with a copy of this novel in exchange for an honest review.*

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## **Emily May says**

There are two really great stories here, a couple of okay ones, many pages of beautiful/whimsical/amusing writing, several interesting ideas, and **a whole lot of codswallop**. Let's call it a 2.5.

As with many other short story collections, like Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties*, *The Merry Spinster* is a mixed bag. With this one, though, I'm leaning more towards declaring it a negative reading experience. There were just too many nonsensical things, too many abrupt and weird endings, too many stories that felt pointless.

By far the best, for me, were "The Rabbit" and "Six Boy Coffins". The first is a retelling of *The Velveteen Rabbit* and it is the stuff of nightmares. Gone is the sob-inducing rabbit of the original and, in his place, is one seriously murderous bunny.

*In the excitement of looking at all the new presents the Velveteen Rabbit was put aside, and he learned for the first time what it was to be ignored, and he did not forget it.*

"Six Boy Coffins" is more of a traditional fairy tale with kings, queens, princesses, curses and punishments. The story arc was the most satisfying, and I couldn't look away right from the horrific opening to the very end.

"The Daughter Cells" was also pretty good. This is a *Little Mermaid* retelling and the narrator had such a snarky, weird and strangely likable voice. It's a perfectly dark and gory opening to the collection.

*She had kissed him, and she had kept his lungs from getting wet; this made him hers according to the laws of most commonsensical people.*

Some others read well and were engaging, but felt like they were building towards something important only to peter out at the end. You think something dramatic or twisty is going to happen and you wait and wait and it ends with the characters sat around drinking tea (or whatever). The titular "The Merry Spinster" is like this-- an enjoyable *Beauty and the Beast* retelling that gets to the end and I had no idea what the point was. I felt like I was supposed to "get" something that I didn't.

"The Frog Princess", too, is an easy read, but feels pointless in the end-- no message, no twist, no climax. Nothing.

Pretty much all the others did nothing for me. I was intrigued by the gender fluid *Cinderella* retelling in "The Thankless Child" but I genuinely have no idea what the hell that story was even about. "The Wedding Party" is another that left me clueless.

Overall, The Merry Spinster was pretty disappointing. I'm glad I was able to find a couple of stand-out stories, but given that they account for less than 20% of the collection, it doesn't make sense to rate this any higher.

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## **Tori (InToriLex) says**

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**Actual Rating 2.5**

You should be a fan of the Grimm' Fairy Tales, in order to appreciate these short stories. I am really familiar with Disney's feel good fairy tales but didn't feel familiar enough with the source material to appreciate the adaptations. These horrific short stories pay homage to their original sources while adding elements of horror and surprise. The characters don't behave according to established gender norms although most of the stories take place in the distant past. I appreciated non gender conforming characters, but found it more confusing than enlightening. There were characters who had names typically associated with one gender, but they were referred to as another. It didn't work well because in the brief stories there was no context to ever address the gender bending elements.

**"They are stuffed in boxes and hidden in the dirt , or else set on fire and turned into cinders, so no one else can make any use of them; they are a prodigiously selfish race and consider themselves their own private property even in death ."**

The stories included surprising twists, villains and humor but none of the elements worked together as enjoyable whole. The writing was engaging but the retelling didn't make sense. The endings of these stories don't give any sort of resolution, but serve as devices to shock the reader. This is the kind of book that will work for fans of horror and original fairy tales, however it didn't resonate well with me.

### **Recommended for readers who:**

- enjoy horror themed fairy tales
- are fans of Brother Grimm Fairy Tales
- appreciate non-traditional gender representation

I received this book from Henry Holt/ Holt Paperbacks in exchange for an honest review.

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