SOFTWARE & TECH

Sleeping Ugly By Jane Yolen

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Introduction: A Fresh Twist on a Classic Tale

Fractured fairy tales have long held a special place in children's literature. They take the familiar stories we know by heart and turn them upside down, challenging expectations and inviting readers to think critically about traditional narratives. Among the most clever and enduring of these modern fairy tale reimaginings is **Sleeping Ugly By Jane Yolen**. First published in 1981, this charming and witty picture book flips the classic story of Sleeping Beauty on its head, offering a refreshing message about inner beauty, kindness, and the idea that “happily ever after” doesn’t always look the way we expect. In this article, we will explore the plot, characters, themes, and lasting impact of this beloved story, and discuss why it remains a must-read for children and adults alike.

What Is Sleeping Ugly By Jane Yolen?

Sleeping Ugly By Jane Yolen is a children's picture book that retells the Sleeping Beauty story with a satirical twist. In Yolen’s version, the princess is not beautiful—she is actually quite unpleasant in both appearance and personality. The story begins with a king and queen who hope for a beautiful, gracious daughter, but instead get a plain, spoiled child named Princess Miserella. Meanwhile, a poor but genuinely kind orphan named Joanne lives in the forest, cared for by a wise old woman. The tale brings these two characters together through a spell cast by a fairy, leading to an unexpected conclusion where true love takes an unconventional form. With humor, heart, and a gentle critique of conventional fairy tale values, Yolen crafts a story that has delighted readers for decades.

Detailed Plot Summary

The story opens with the birth of Princess Miserella, a girl who is “plain as a post” and thoroughly disagreeable. Her parents are disappointed, but they try to raise her properly. However, Miserella grows up rude, vain, and selfish. No one enjoys being around her, and she treats everyone with disdain.

In a separate part of the kingdom, there lives a young orphan named Joanne. Joanne is not particularly beautiful on the outside, but she has a kind and loving heart. She lives alone in a small hut deep in the woods after her grandmother passes away. She spends her days tending to the forest animals and helping anyone in need.

One day, a slightly batty fairy named Belinda arrives at the castle to give Miserella a gift. She intends to bestow a blessing, but the princess, being rude, insults the fairy. In anger, Belinda places a curse on Miserella: the princess will sleep for a hundred years. However, there is a catch—the spell can only be broken by a prince who finds her beautiful. But when the prince arrives and sees Miserella, he is not charmed at all. He finds her ugly and refuses to kiss her. He leaves her sleeping.

Meanwhile, Joanne, while wandering in the forest, comes upon the castle. She enters and sees the sleeping princess. She also meets the grumpy old woman who is the fairy in disguise. Instead of being frightened or disgusted, Joanne feels sorry for the princess and tries to help. But as she approaches, she accidentally gets caught in the spell and falls asleep too.

Years later, another prince comes looking for the legendary sleeping princess. When he arrives, he sees both Miserella and Joanne. He is repulsed by Miserella's appearance, but he is drawn to Joanne's gentle face. He kisses Joanne, and she awakens. The spell is broken for her, but the princess remains asleep. Joanne and the prince fall in love and marry, living happily ever after—with Miserella still sleeping in the castle, a reminder that beauty, like happiness, is not one-size-fits-all.

Key Characters in Sleeping Ugly By Jane Yolen

Princess Miserella

Miserella is the antithesis of the traditional fairy tale princess. She is not only physically plain but also has an ugly soul. Her name itself is a clue to her character. Through her, Yolen satirizes the notion that princesses are inherently beautiful and good. Miserella's fate—left sleeping forever—suggests that external beauty without kindness is worthless.

Joanne

Joanne is the true hero of the story. She is ordinary looking but possesses a deep inner beauty. She is kind, compassionate, and selfless. Her appearance is secondary to her heart, and it is this inner radiance that the prince falls in love with. Joanne is a positive role model for young readers, showing that worth is not determined by looks.

The Fairy Belinda

Belinda is a flawed fairy, forgetful and easily offended, but not truly evil. She represents the arbitrary nature of magic in fairy tales. Her spell is imperfect, and she even forgets to make the prince fall in love. This adds a layer of humor and randomness to the plot.

The Prince

Unlike the typical prince who kisses a comatose beauty without question, this prince uses his own judgment. He refuses to kiss a woman he finds unattractive, both inside and out. He chooses Joanne because her kindness shines through her plain features. This challenges the idea of love at first sight based solely on appearance.

Major Themes and Lessons

Inner Beauty vs. Outer Beauty

The central theme of **Sleeping Ugly By Jane Yolen** is that true beauty comes from within. Joanne is not described as beautiful, but her goodness makes her attractive. Miserella, despite being a princess, is ugly because of her cruel behavior. The story teaches children that kindness, empathy, and generosity are more important than physical appearance.

Challenging Fairy Tale Tropes

Yolen deliberately subverts the classic Sleeping Beauty story. The princess is not beautiful, the fairy is not all-knowing, and the prince does not automatically fall in love. The tale encourages critical thinking about traditional narratives and the messages they carry about gender and beauty standards.

The Meaning of "Happily Ever After"

The ending of the book is unconventional. Miserella does not get a happy ending, and the prince does not

awaken her. The “happily ever after” is reserved for Joanne and the prince. This teaches that not everyone deserves a romantic resolution, and that our actions have consequences. It also suggests that happiness can be found in unexpected places, not just in a royal marriage.

Empathy and Kindness

Joanne’s decision to help the sleeping princess, even though she has never met her, shows empathy. Her kindness is what ultimately leads to her own rescue. The story encourages readers to be compassionate, even to those who might be unpleasant.

Writing Style and Illustrations

Jane Yolen is a master of brevity and wit. Her prose in **Sleeping Ugly By Jane Yolen** is simple yet playful, filled with delicious irony. She uses repetition and rhythmic language that appeals to young children, while also including sophisticated humor that adults can appreciate. For example, the description of Miserella as “plain as a post” is both amusing and effective.

The illustrations, originally done by Diane Stanley, are whimsical and detailed. They capture the fairy tale setting while also adding to the humor. The characters’ expressions are exaggerated, especially Miserella’s perpetual scowl and the fairy’s confusion. The pictures support the text perfectly, making the book a visual treat as well as a literary one.

Why Sleeping Ugly By Jane Yolen Is a Classic

Since its publication over forty years ago, this book has remained in print and continues to be used in classrooms and libraries. Its appeal lies in its timeless message and its clever deconstruction of fairy tale clichés. In an era where body positivity and inclusive storytelling are more important than ever, **Sleeping Ugly By Jane Yolen** feels remarkably relevant. It teaches children to look beyond surfaces and to question the stories they are told. Additionally, it empowers readers who might not see themselves reflected in traditional princess tales. The book is often recommended for ages 4 to 8, but its themes resonate with older readers as well.

Educational Uses

Teachers frequently use this book to introduce the concept of fractured fairy tales. Students can compare and contrast it with the original Sleeping Beauty, analyzing character traits and plot changes. It also serves as a springboard for discussions about kindness, prejudice, and fairness. Writing prompts can ask children to imagine their own alternative endings or to create a new character who breaks a fairy tale stereotype.

Comparison to Other Fairy Tale Reversals

Sleeping Ugly By Jane Yolen is part of a broader movement in children’s literature that reimagines classic stories. Similar books include *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch, where a princess rescues a prince, and *Prince Cinders* by Babette Cole, a gender-swapped Cinderella. What sets Yolen’s book apart is its focus on the ugliness of personality rather than just gender roles. It directly addresses the beauty myth in a way that few other picture books do. The story also has a darker edge—Miserella does not get redeemed, which is unusual for a children’s book. This realism makes the story more memorable and thought-provoking.

Author Background: Jane Yolen

Jane Yolen is one of the most prolific and respected authors in children's literature. She has written over 400 books, including the Caldecott-winning *Owl Moon*, the *How Do Dinosaurs* series, and many fairy tale retellings. Her work often explores themes of fantasy, history, and social justice. **Sleeping Ugly By Jane Yolen** reflects

her talent for blending humor with deeper meaning. She has said that she intended the book as a response to the pressure on girls to be beautiful. By creating a princess who is both plain and mean, she challenges the notion that physical beauty equates to virtue.

Conclusion: A Timeless Lesson in Kindness

In a world where fairy tales often teach that beauty leads to happiness, **Sleeping Ugly By Jane Yolen** offers a refreshing counterpoint. With its memorable characters, sharp wit, and heartfelt message, this book continues to charm and educate new generations of readers. It reminds us that kindness is far more beautiful than a pretty face, and that true love sees beyond the surface. Whether you are a parent, teacher, or simply a lover of clever storytelling, this fractured fairy tale deserves a place on your shelf. It proves that sometimes the ugliest story can have the most beautiful lesson.

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