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Children Who See Fairies

Simon Young

University of Virginia Program Siena (Italy, CET)

simonyoungfl@gmail.com

By taking eighty-eight fairy experiences of English-speaking children aged from about three to ten, from the last eighty years, we look at the characteristics of fairy sightings among the very young. Children have more sleep-related fairy experiences than adults. In natural settings children focus their experiences on trees: there is little interest in the flowers so common in contemporary adult fairy experiences. In some cases, meanwhile, fairies become a fixture in the life of a child, and here parallels with the psychological literature on 'invisible friends' are intriguing. We also look at the role of memory in the encounter as the child integrates and elaborates the experience; and the consequences for the grown child's spiritual development.

Keywords: children; fairies; memory; popular culture; supernatural.

1. Introduction

A five-year-old girl, in England, lying in bed between her sleeping parents, sees fairies dance on the dresser (§335). Fairies join in the games of two children playing under a fig tree in New Zealand (§488). A boy in the United States watches, while swimming underwater, a 'leprechaun' walk across the bottom of his grandparents' pool. He rapidly surfaces, and when he returns to examine the creature it has disappeared... (§319) Fairy encounters are experienced by men and women of all ages. But there is a modern tradition that children have a greater capacity to see and to interact with fairies (Doyle 1921, 126-131; cf. Samuel 2011, xiii).¹ A recent survey of fairy sightings, the *Fairy Census*, gives some substance to this notion: almost 40% of experiences had been had by those aged 0-20: and 22% by children under ten years of age. These encounters were recalled, often decades later, by grown children, sometimes as a

¹ It is interesting that there is not a corresponding tradition in British or Irish folklore of children having a greater sensitivity to the supernatural, at least not one that the present author has been able to identify. The contrast with animals, which were believed, particularly in prior folklore, to have the ability to see the supernatural is striking.

turning point in their own lives. In this short study we examine children's fairy experiences and the cultural, physiological and cognitive processes that help shape them.

We particularly look at three types of childhood fairy experiences, which for shorthand I will term here: 'bed fairies', 'nature fairies', and 'friend fairies'. In this survey I will particularly compare what I will call 'children's fairies' (namely fairy experiences of children aged ten and under) with 'adolescent's fairies' (fairies experiences of those aged 11-20) and 'adult's fairies' (fairies experienced by those twenty-one and older). Fairy experiences, note, are not necessarily only visual: they might include sounds, physical proofs or simply a vague supernatural feeling. These experiences are clearly extremely subjective and depend on the perceptions of those who reported their encounters. There is no attempt here to undertake the hopeless task of proving the existence or the non-existence of fairies: I offer instead a typology of children's fairy experience in the English-speaking world for the second half of the twentieth and for the early twenty-first century. The aim is to establish how children experience the supernatural and fairies' role in the psychological and imaginative life of the young and the very young. I am particularly interested in the power of memory and how cultural representations shape children's fairy experiences.

2. *The Fairy Census*

The *Fairy Census* was an international online survey. It was carried out from 18 Nov 2014 to 20 Nov, 2017: a second phase of collection is now underway.² The *Census* took inspiration from two previous projects. First, there was Walter Evans Wentz's *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911): in three years of fieldwork in Brittany, Cornwall, Ireland, the Isle of Man, Scotland and Wales, Evans Wentz recorded hundreds of fairy experiences. Second, Marjorie Johnson's *Seeing Fairies* (2014), a book again with hundreds of fairy experiences, gathered, rather more haphazardly, between the 1930s and the 1990s. Evans Wentz published with Oxford University Press as an anthropologist, albeit a very unconventional one; Johnson wrote as a fairy seer, a suburban mystic. However, both had the same central aim: they wished to demonstrate that fairies existed; the drive for proof often lurks behind collections or surveys of the supernatural (e.g. F.W.H.M. 1894; for an important modern exception Bennett 1987). The *Fairy Census* emphatically did not have this aim. It, instead, was focussed on witnesses rather than fairies. What kind of people see fairies and under what conditions? All too many folklorists (Bennett 1987, 13-17) and psychologists (Bem and Honorton 1994, 4) ignore the supernatural as a field of study.

² The Fairy Census can be found at https://www.academia.edu/35591008/The_Fairy_Census_2014-2017.pdf, with five hundred fairy experiences: all references in the article refer to the number experience, e.g. §34. The survey itself is now in its second phase and can be found at: <http://www.fairyist.com/survey/>.

To achieve this the *Fairy Census* had forty questions: completion typically took from ten to thirty minutes. These ranged from standard fare – gender, age... – to rather more unusual queries – ‘Do you have problems with your hearing or eyesight?’; ‘How often do you have supernatural experiences?’ There was also ample space to write freely on the fairy experience: ‘Please describe your fairy experience in as much detail as possible’: answers ranged from seven to several thousand words. There were, then, supplementary questions to tease out more details: ‘How big were the fairy/fairies?’ ‘What sex were the fairy/fairies?’; ‘Why do you think your experience was a fairy experience, as opposed to a ghost or an alien or an angel or some other type of anomalous experience?’ The survey taker was asked for permission to use the material given and also asked whether he or she would mind being contacted in the case of follow up questions: some left their email addresses. Respondents had learnt about the *Census* in articles in the press, on the radio, social media (the survey got over 2000 likes on Facebook) and, of course, by word of mouth. In this the *Fairy Census* took inspiration, albeit in a greatly changed media environment, from the strategies used by Marjorie Johnson a generation before (Young 2013, 145-146).

In the three years that the questionnaire ran some 500 people from around the world, but predominantly from the Anglosphere answered questions about a specific fairy experience. In these experiences they suspected or believed that they had come into contact with a supernatural entity that they identified as a fairy. These 500 experiences have since been epublished as a 160,000 word pdf *Fairy Census, 2014-2017*, with the most important data from the survey. This pdf is freely available online with more details of the survey in its preface and a sample questionnaire.³ Of these 500 individuals, 444 fully answered the online questionnaire about a fairy experience. There were, then, also a number of unsuitable answers (off topic, incoherent, folklore observations ...); incomplete answers; and third-person accounts where a respondent wrote about another’s experiences. When possible and when the information they gave was interesting these were included in the *Fairy Census*, but they were left out of any statistics.

For the study of children’s fairy experiences the dataset has been further cropped. As noted above the vast majority of respondents, 415, came from the English-speaking world: Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the United States. It was decided to remove all non-Anglosphere references, of which there were 29. This was done because, it was reasoned, experiences from the Anglosphere would make for a more uniform set that had been shaped by a similar culture of childhood and the supernatural.⁴ The respondents were self-selecting. These were not 415 people from the general population, but 415 individuals who believed or suspected that they had had a fairy experience and who were prepared to put the experience down, getting to

³ https://www.academia.edu/35591008/The_Fairy_Census_2014-2017.pdf Note that the author is very happy to provide, upon request, the excel versions of the data used for this article.

⁴ As it happens the experiences of children from continental Europe would have barely changed the results, but they were, nevertheless, ignored for the purposes of this article.

the end of a long questionnaire to do so. The figures have, then, no value as a cross-section of the various English-speaking countries. However, they do allow for an analysis of fairy experiences and for internal comparison. In this paper I have particularly looked at the results for children (0-10). But to put these in relief I have frequently compared children's experiences to those of the adolescents (11-20) and adults (21+) who responded to the *Fairy Census*.

There are 88 children (0-10), 69 adolescents (11-20) and 258 adults (21-) in the sample used here. Age was expressed on the questionnaire by decades: 0-10, 11-20, 21-30 etc. But internal references to age suggest that the youngest childhood encounters probably took place when the respondents were about three (§66, §67, §100). One of the most striking features of this sample is the gender imbalance. 84.1% of childhood encounters were sent in by females: compared with 'only' 68.11% of adolescents and 'only' 67.82% of adults. That women have more interest in the supernatural is well established (Clarke 2014, 63-65; Samuel 2011: 71, 134): not, of course, the same thing as saying that they necessarily have greater supernatural 'gifts' (Samuel 2011: 44-46). There must also be the suspicion that women are more interested in fairies, which frequently, and have long had, feminine qualities (e.g. Hall 2007, 157-166). Fairies are particularly feminized in the world of very young children: young girls are given fairy dolls and go to parties as fairy princesses, fairies on children's television and in children's films are invariably female. Even so that only 15.9% of those children that saw fairies were boys is remarkable. Are male encounters perhaps less likely to be remembered or retold in later life: we look at some of the problems with memory below? The only way to understand whether this bias is real or not would be to actually interview a series of children about their recent experiences: for present purposes this is impracticable.

3. Fairy Models

Before looking at specific features of children's fairy experiences it will be useful to give a very general overview of fairies in western culture. Fairies have been defined as 'magical, living, resident humanoids': they are supernatural, but they are not the undead, and these human-looking beings are usually tied to a particular location: a hill or a wood (Young and Houlbrook 2017, 12). Fairies have been recorded in the English-speaking world since the birth of the language in the early Middle Ages (Hall 2007). However, fairies, like all supernatural creatures, have evolved, in that time, in the human imagination (for a general guide Purkiss, 2000). For example, medieval fairies lived in a community, next to a given human community, in an uneasy symbiotic relationship with their human neighbours. Medieval fairies proved difficult and dangerous: humans were injured, kidnapped and killed for slight infractions of apparently arbitrary fairy codes. In the early modern period this vision of fairies began to change and by the late nineteenth century there was increasingly the idea that fairies were an aspect of natural processes, and particularly of vegetation: medieval

fairies had only been tangentially linked to fertility. These ‘nature’ fairies are usually delightful and friendly and particularly associated with children. They rarely hurt or harm. Italian scholar Carlo Donà has rather cruelly called them ‘la fatina cretina’ (the cretinous fairy, 2012, 4). The two types of fairies are not only different in character but also in appearance. Classical fairies were, generally speaking, described as being of infant or adult size: they were frequently seen in groups. They wore clothes, often old-style clothes, and carried out very human occupations: battles, feasts, funerals, hunts... The nature fairy is more typically seen alone or in small hive like groups, where individuals act robotically in unison. These fairies were small, frequently butterfly-size, with wings (an innovation that only became commonplace in the nineteenth century) and they often took on aspects of the element or plant that they represented: e.g. a rose fairy would be red or have a petal dress.

The chronological break between these two types of fairies – nature fairies and what I will refer to here as ‘classical’ fairies – has, of course, never been clean. The two types have often co-existed with each other or simply blended. For example, classical fairies were still present in 1930s Ireland;⁵ while, it might be argued that elements of the nature fairy begin with Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night Dream* (Latham 1930, 176). There is, then, a further complicating factor: the determination of ‘reactionary’ authors, in modern fiction and film, to bring the traditional fairy back. The beginning of this process can perhaps be found in Kipling (1906, 14) who has Puck describe modern fairies as ‘little buzzflies with butterfly wings and gauze petticoats, and shiny stars in their hair, and a wand like a schoolteacher’s cane for punishing bad boys and rewarding good ones’. Puck compares these human fantasies to the real ‘People of the Hills’. Other such modern fairies in traditional guise can be found in, say, *True Blood* (2008-2014) and the works of Tolkien (the elves).

In a modern fairy encounter there are, in any case, different models in the background. Here are two very different descriptions from the *Fairy Census*: the first conforms to the classical, the second to the nature fairy. ‘Two [of the three fairies] were taller than the adults I knew, one was shorter. They shimmered in the light, so I couldn’t see their faces, but it was obvious they were wearing strange clothes’ (§325). ‘[They were] [s]mall, maybe four to five inches tall, feminine, winged. Soft colors, pearly and opal-like’ (§222). To these two models we can, then, add a third. There has long been a connection made between balls of light (BOLs) and fairies: fairies were sometimes said to carry these lights or sometimes to be these lights (e.g. Clobery 1659, 72-73). It is striking that in the *Fairy Census* BOLs are frequently described as fairies, even those with no anthropomorphic elements. For example, in 1960s in Ohio a boy watched a fairy that ‘looked like a sparkler sitting on top of a lamp’ for several minutes as it buzzed around his holiday home (§349).

⁵ Classical fairies are found again and again in the Irish School’s Survey, 197-1939 <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes> (accessed 22 Jan 2018)

However, these three categories by no means exhaust all possibilities. Often some very surprising entities are classed as fairies in the *Census*: for example, a football-sized walking lemon disturbed the sleep of one respondent (§315). Here we are probably witnessing the failure of modern categories. Something that would have been routinely classified as a demon in earlier times, is now not so easily labelled. It is a fairy because... what else could it be? 'Obviously what I saw was no gauzy-winged Victorian fantasy. But the fair folk purportedly come in many shapes and sizes... it seems appropriate to consider my encounter applicable to this realm more than another' (§315). In other cases, awkward visions seem to be assimilated to the fairy models mentioned above through secondary elaboration. An English boy in the 1970s saw what he 'described as' 'little nasty wolves' coming out of a wardrobe in his bedroom (§37). However, 'after drawing them for my mother, which I remember very clearly, I can now say they looked more like fairies'. These 'fairies' were '[s]mall men with lots of hair in brown suits, almost dirty looking (imagine miners).' Here a child's initial impressions were perhaps altered through a conversation with a parent: wolves became gnomes?

A question that is fascinating, but, at least in a study like this, impossible to resolve, is to what extent popular culture affects supernatural encounters (e.g. Clark and Loftus 1996, 141-142). When a young Californian writes 'I thought [the fairies] were like Disney's Tinker Bell' does that mean that the fairies resembled Tinker Bell or that Tinker Bell inspired the fairies or their appearance? We could ask similar questions of an Australian tooth fairy: 'I guess now looking back, [she] looked a lot like Walt Disney's Cinderella but real and glittery' (§466). Likewise the New Zealander who chased fairies: 'I had only learnt about them [i.e. fairies] from children's books and nursery rhymes. The fairies I saw were very [similar?] to those in the Cottingley photos' (§491). Sometimes a popular culture reference is almost certainly just a way to situate the experience: so a BOL witnessed by a child and two adults, 'moved around the room like Tinker Bell': it had no human features, though. On other occasions we might wonder whether an idea in popular culture was not responsible for an entire experience. A girl in Virginia, in the 1980s, opens a wardrobe in her sister's room and discovers a magical world there... (§388 – Lewis 1950). One remarkable experience from 1950s London has a young girl meet a 'wicker-basket affair with a balloon on top' in her garden. The fliers are dressed in top hats and black jackets and try to convince her to go away with them. 'I would swear', she wrote as an adult, 'that this truly happened and was not a dream or any sort of imagination. I cannot recollect reading anything before or after with any illustration of such a strangeness in it either' (§80). But the encounter does recall, in some ways, William Pène du Bois's *The Twenty-One Balloons*, published in 1947, in which a man with a suit and top hat flies on a platform powered by twenty-one hot air balloons.

4. Children's Fairies

A central aspect of children's fairy experiences is the role of family. Family approval is clearly not indispensable for seeing fairies: [my mother] 'didn't see any fairies and told me I was silly' (§283), but a little girl in 1950s Kentucky continued to play her fairy games, indifferent to censure. There must be the suspicion that fairy-tolerant parents will be more likely to raise children who have or, at least, who share fairy experiences: 'Most laughed at me, my mother believed me as there was no reason not to' (§3); or consider the mother who used to take her child to leave scraps for the fairies in the wood even if 'that was probably just something she made up' (§277). This tendency will presumably have been even greater in fairy-believing families. One respondent asserted that '[f]airies have followed my family for years' (§377); a mother confided that she, too, had, as a child, seen fairies in the same Arkansas wood as her daughter (§219); and an American grandmother in the 1960s 'didn't want me to sleep with the window open for fear of the little people stealing me' (§349).

In some cases a family's decision to foster fantasy perhaps led, sometimes inadvertently, to fairy visions. One eight-year-old Australian girl remembered waking up to see the tooth fairy who brought her 'my favourite toy growing up' (§466). The memory is entangled with her mother's involvement with this gift: 'My mum swore she didn't know where it came from but was quick to dispose of the wrapping and note attached'. In one charming case grandparents daily left sweets for a five-year-old English girl at a well, telling their granddaughter that the fairies had put the sweets out as gifts. The little girl was aware of the deception, but on the final day, while saying goodbye to the fairies, she came face-to-face with a real fairy that looked like a small doll (§33): she compared it, interestingly, to Cindy (a British 'Barbie'). A girl from Minnesota, meanwhile, had a conversation with a fairy in a tree: 'At first the voice was not clear, so I asked it to repeat what it said. Then I heard clearly. "Hello down there!" "Are you a fairy?" I asked. "Yes!" The voice replied.' Was this rather atypical fairy experience a parental intervention? The little girl 'had been starting to lose belief shortly before this experience, but it helped to quickly bring me back to believing' (§277).

An important consideration before looking at the sub-types of children's fairy visions is how they are remembered. Relatively few respondents completed the questionnaire while they were children. Just 6.81% recorded the event as taking place in the 2010s. These were, then, not, for the most part, contemporary or even near contemporary reports. To the problems always associated with the recording of supernatural experiences, some of which we have described above, we must add, then, the problem of memory. Most respondents were describing an event that took place many decades before: in the 1990s (12.5%), the 1980s (18.18%), the 1970s (20.45%) or the 1960s (18.88%). Two respondents recalled a childhood fairy experience from the 1930s. This should mean, of course, that there were problems remembering the experience. In some cases the respondents admitted as much: 'the details elude me after thirty-one years' (§171); '[s]ince it happened a while ago I can't remember the

exact noises' (§201). There is also a general and very understandable vagueness about surrounding details. For example 10.23% of childhood respondents could not remember the approximate time of the day the fairy experience took place: compared with 1.45% and 2.33% for, respectively, adolescents and adults.

However, most respondents claimed to have good recall of what had happened: '[the fairy] was very clear and has stayed with me' (§17); 'I remember it to this day (fifty years of age) and am CONVINCED that what I saw was real' (§344); 'this event I remember just like yesterday, vividly' (§398). Indeed, 63.64% of young respondents claimed that they had 'unusually vivid memories of the experience': compared with 60.86% of adolescents and only 46.9% of adults. Here it is instructive to read the description of a young girl, writing up an incident that cannot have taken place more than four or five years before she filled out the *Fairy Census*: 'I don't really recall what happened now, but I kind of remember little floating lights dancing in the street on my cul-de-sac' (§415). Allowed to evolve will this memory harden, over time, into something more certain? If it becomes important, then, very possibly it will; there is also the possibility of false memories (e.g. Otgaar *et alii*. 2009); and the role of fantasy in memory (Principe and Smith 2007). Some respondents were all too aware of the tricks that memory could play: 'Given my age, and my love of faeries thereafter, it's possible that I imagined clothes from what I saw in storybooks. I remember an outfit very close to the Disney Peter Pan, but as I only saw the faery in silhouette I think that was my imagination dressing him' (§75).⁶

5. Bed Fairies

I was sick in bed with swollen glands in my throat. I was six years old and the fairy came to me she was beautiful dressed in yellow her wings were also yellow I will never forget my time with her. Isle of Wight, 1940s, §60.

This short account is typical of many in the *Fairy Census*. A young child encounters a fairy while in bed, or in bedrooms and environs, usually at night time – this was one of three children who reported being ill or recuperating (§60, §195, §344). Of course, night time is traditionally associated with the supernatural and sleep and associated mental states favour supernatural encounters including hypnagogic visions, sleep paralysis (Hufford 1982; Watanabe and Furuya 2012) and dreams later re-elaborated as memories (Clark and Loftus 1996, 141-2). Humans, it should be noted, often have dreams of supernatural beings (McNamara and Bulkelly 2015, 2-4); and children aged four to twelve seem particularly prone to this (Muris *et alii* 2000: 46, table 3, compare with Foster and Anderson 1936, 81 table 8). Children are, on the evidence of the *Fairy Census*, more likely to have fairy experiences in their bedroom than their parents. Children, presumably because of their reduced freedom, often experience fairies in

⁶ Before we explain away all sightings as tricks of memories we must remember that many adults have fairy experiences that they report immediately.

their own house: 37.5% against 30.43% for adolescents and 22.48% for adults. Some 31.81% of child respondents, meanwhile, reported that they had ‘just woken up or were just about to go to sleep’, when they saw their fairies: among adolescents the number was 10.14% and among adults 17.05%. It is worth remembering that for many children, perhaps particularly those who grow up sharing a room, bed is their one unambiguously private space.

Traditional folklore does not have fairies appearing to children in bed: save by implication when babies or infants are stolen by fairies in changeling legends – the nightmare (Hufford 1982) is not part of the fairy complex. The only time, indeed, that children’s cots feature in British and Irish tales is as a battleground between fairies and human protective devices (Piaschewski 1935, 67-117). However, from the early 1900s accounts start to crop up of middle-class children having fairy experiences in bed (e.g. Fraser 1936): Peter Pan is an interesting literary reflex (Harris 2008, 77-81). Why are there no equivalent records prior to this? First, there is certainly a long tradition of sleep being a time when humans encounter supernatural beings: very likely for some of the considerations given above. Second, there must be the suspicion that middle-class infants were assimilating the small ‘nature fairies’ of late nineteenth-century children’s literature to their supernatural experiences, at a time when demons and angels were slowly being washed out of Anglo-Saxon culture (Marshall 2011). Put in the simplest terms, children and adults have always had supernatural experiences in bed, which they will have understood according to the supernatural culture in which they were living. A category shift in the 1800s made fairies a supernatural entity that middle class children could see in the night.

How do these night-time fairies look and act? Children are more likely to see groups of fairies at night and these fairies are frequently, more so than in daytime visitations, small. There were the tiny fairy cowboy settlers glimpsed in Oregon (§356) with wagons and lamps; the three-inch men who swarmed over a bed playfully pinching a boy in Washington State until their beatnik leader, told them to stop (§398); the Robin Hood and Merry Men fairies from postwar Glasgow (§167); the fairy parade across the bedroom floor – ‘all dressed in finery... [with] musical instruments and tiny animals’ (§364); the adult-sized fairy procession out on the street (§330); the miniature wolves that came out of a wardrobe in 1990s Devon (§37); the gnomes who lived in a wooden play box in England in the 1970s (§94); or the fairies dancing around a Christmas gift in 1960s Scotland (§170). One is reminded here of ‘numerosity’: the feature of seeing, in some neurological conditions, ‘rows or phalanxes of people, all dressed similarly and making similar motions... hallucinatory figures often seem to be wearing ‘exotic dress’, rich robes and strange headgear’ (Sacks 2012, 22). One is, also, reminded again with the cowboy, Robin Hood and even beatnik fairies of the way in which popular culture seems to shape supernatural visions (Clark and Loftus 1996, 141-142).

As to character we run the whole gamut. There are malevolent fairies: for example, the Devon wolves were ‘nasty’; and the playbox gnomes reported from England were clearly unpleasant. There are also frightening experiences: a boy in 1950s North

Carolina was 'TERRIFIED' of some dancing fairies (§344), though he does not elaborate why. Another child, a little girl, had a conversation with fairies who had flown in her window, then, '[s]cared I screamed for my mother' (§61): the girl thought that the fairies wanted to take her away. A Manitoban was surrounded by malevolent fairies who threatened to stab her with spears (§197). It is quite possible that some of these experiences were connected to sleep paralysis. The Manitoban wrote 'I could not move, and did not cry out.' One girl from Scotland, Perth was 'frozen with fear' when she saw a small man at the foot of her bed (§173). These are the only references to an inability to move in bed (though see also §330): might we not have expected more? In other cases fairies were friendly or benevolent. For example, a great green man (one of the rare big fairies in children's night-time visions) guarded a child sleeping in a cot: 'I felt the Green Man was there, of his own free will, to look after me.' Often fairies seemed 'playful and friendly'. Others consoled: '[t]he fairy said that all will be ok and talked to me' (§13). 'They were there to entertain me or to show me something' (§224).

6. Nature Fairies

Walking home in woodland after building den with friends. Was nine at the time. Came around a tree and saw two small creatures two-feet high sitting on a stump. Appeared to be carrying small canes and dressed in brown cloaks. Watched them for short time, they saw me then vanished (§1).

This short account could stand for many of the experiences of young children and, indeed, adults meeting fairies in nature. Part of modern fairy belief is the notion that fairies are the spirits of growing things. This belief (which has its origins in Neo-Platonism and early modern magic) leached out of theosophy in the late nineteenth century and became a commonplace of fairy writing, both erudite and popular (Gardner 1982 [1966], 48-53): today it is frequently found in fairy films, e.g. the *Tinkerbell* film series (2008-) or *Epic* (2013). It was evidently present in the minds of many of the children who had fairy experiences: 'I used to imagine the scattering of flowers and leaves around the garden was [the work of the fairies].' 'To me [the fairies] were about my size, and they were connected to certain parts of nature' (§317). An elderly woman in Delaware told her grandson, meanwhile, that he might 'have seen one of the fairies that keep gardens healthy' (§249).

However, there are some interesting differences with adult sightings in nature. First and perhaps most importantly, children tended to have their experiences in gardens 35.22%: as opposed to 14.49% among adolescents and 22.09% among adults. Conversely they were less likely to have fairy experiences in woods, 13.63%: compared with 33.33% among adolescents and 32.17% among adults. Here we are likely seeing the circumscribed world of children, who, particularly from the 1980s onward, play in closely supervised areas with adults always within sight or screaming distance (Rutherford 2011, 60-88, for the US). Some children did venture out away

from home: but these were the exceptions. One child in Yorkshire 'lived in the countryside and often wandered over the hills and woods where there were streams' (§134). A child in Arkansas had adventures in the nearby woods: though she later marveled that her mother had given her this freedom (§219).

It is a common-place in folklore that fairies take on the characteristics of the landscape around them. By this logic the fairies of lowland England will be much tamer than the fairies of, say, the Scottish Highlands. There may be something to this, thinking of the fairy traditions of these two areas. Children's fairy experiences seem generally to have been more positive than those of older respondents: might this have to do with them encountering fairies in safer places (particularly the home and garden)? 45.45% of children's fairies in the *Census* were described as being 'friendly': compared to just 24.64% of the fairies of adolescents and 35.27% of adult fairies. 29.55% of children's fairies were 'joyful': the numbers for adolescents and adults were, respectively, 13.04% and 23.26%. There were, meanwhile, only two cases of a child respondent claiming that fairies were 'angry' (§26, §37). There is often, though, an underlying unease about encounters: a fear about what the fairy really represents and distrust on the part of a child. For example, a girl who met a gnome in a garage remembered: 'I did not believe that the gnome had any particularly terrible intentions, but I felt uncomfortable, like he was not truly friendly' (§375). A girl in London (§80): 'I felt it wanted to do mischief. This was not a friendly experience at all'. On several occasions children are worried that the fairies want to take them away (§61, §80, §479): is this a distant echo of changeling traditions; or stranger-fear drilled into modern children from an early age?

In adult fairy experiences in gardens and woods fairies are frequently connected to flowers and to trees. Interestingly, children see flower and plant fairies relatively rarely (§14, §268, §374), despite spending more time in gardens. Trees, though, appear again and again: usually garden trees. There are many accounts where children come into contact with the spirit or resident of a tree: a lemon tree in New Zealand (§491); a peach tree in Arkansas (§218); a dogwood tree in New Jersey (§325); trees in Manitoba (§197); and a cedar tree in British Columbia (§195). Children also meet the spirits of tree stumps as in the example quoted above (§1): see also §125 for a stump in Suffolk; and §342 for a stump in North Carolina. Children seem to be particularly interested in holes under trees. We might reason that these are intriguing but also amenable to examination for infants. Fairies disappear down a hole under the lemon tree (§491) and under the peach tree (§218): '[I]ater I stuck my arm down it, even tried digging it out till my grandmother told me to quit and leave the little people alone' (§218): see also §200 where tuxedo-ed fairies fly out of a hole in Canada; and §90A, a third person account of a British pre-school teacher about children and a tree's roots.

There are, then, many more fairy experiences where a tree or bush features, incidentally, in a fairy experience. There is an ancient oak in Sherwood (§100), bushes in Derbyshire (§31); some glowing trees in Texas (§376), a bush in Texas (§378), a weeping ash in Essex (§46); a box bush in Delaware (§249) a tree in a London park

(§83); a honeysuckle bush in Nebraska (§317); an apricot tree in Colorado (§243), a pine in Minnesota (§308), Australian trees (§471), a lilac bush in Ohio (§353), a mimosa tree in Texas (§375), a fig tree in New Zealand (§488); and an apple tree in Lincolnshire (§76). It is striking, how respondents so often remember the tree type after many decades. Perhaps these were trees that had already made an impression on the children in question, priming them for a connected supernatural experience? Trees, as anyone who plays with children in a garden know, are quickly integrated into games: they have a very real presence.

Another feature of nature fairies (one shared by children and adults alike) are encounters with what might be called ‘insect’ fairies. These are insect-sized fairies that, one suspects, might have actually been an exotic insect or a commonplace insect seen in an unusual light. For instance, a Californian respondent remembered being on a drive with her grandparents a decade before. Looking ‘out the window and [!] saw a small insect-like thing glowing red and blue flying outside my window. It only stayed there for a couple [of] moments before flying away’ (§227). Some of these accounts perhaps represent the triumph of hope over reason. As one English respondent wrote, bravely, after recalling her own insect-fairy experience some twenty years before: ‘The recent Rossendale exhibition of fairy photos [where may flies had been photographed to look like fairies] made me realize that [my experience] was almost certainly an insect lit up by the sun. But I still choose to believe it was a fairy. I’m ok with that’ (§98). These insect fairies are also, then, a reminder of how keen many children are to see fairies: how something out of the ordinary, glimpsed often only for a second, can be remembered as a precious supernatural experience.

7. Fairy Friends

As a small child, I played in the woods near our house. On multiple occasions I interacted with what I know now to be fairies. They appeared to me as tiny people who would run along beside me and [spoke] to me telepathically. They would tell me where to walk, which logs to avoid because of snakes §219.

Sixteen children in the *Fairy Census* (about a sixth of the 0-10 sample) described not just a one off encounter, but a relationship with fairies over months or years. In some cases the fairies were an evil force on the edge of the child’s life: we have already described the wardrobe wolves (§37) and the box gnomes from English bedrooms (§94). At other times fairies were play friends: a little girl made clothes out of hollyhocks for some fairies in Kentucky (283); fairies came to play with two sisters under a tree in New Zealand – ‘small pale colours, floaty clothes soft gentle appearance delicate wings’ (488). Some fairies looked after their charges: the Arkansas fairies, noted at the head of this section, warned a little girl about snake-infested logs (§219); the ‘guardian angels’ who quaffed champagne in California (§222); and a fairy in Nottinghamshire who introduced herself as a young girl’s ‘fairy mother’ and who shared her secret name (§100). Some fairies were, meanwhile, presences rather than

personalities: the ‘mist and movement’ fairies in a wood in British Columbia, ‘[t]hey stood quietly and gracefully adult-sized if not taller’ (§195); and the New Zealand fairies glimpsed repeatedly in a garden in Auckland ‘[t]hey were very wispy and long-haired, quite ghostly, almost transparent in form’ (§479).

In some cases we seem to have examples not just of imaginary friends but of private mythologies. The young girl in Manitoba who was attacked in the night wrote: ‘I believed that my home in the country was surrounded by good fairies, who lived in the trees, but these [fairies at my bed] were malevolent, and I thought [the attackers] must be brownies’ (§197). There was the boy in Oxfordshire who would bid farewell as his family drove him off on holiday to a phalanx of fairies who were ‘[t]all, with long hair, and very beautiful faces’: ‘they were like distant ‘guardians’, seeming almost to do a job, but neither liking or disliking it’ and they are described as ‘*genii loci*’ (§105). There was the Canadian boy who had mapped out his local world and who had identified two fairy locations: one an ancient giant Cedar Tree and the other a brick walkway (§195). One extraordinary account from America has, meanwhile, a young girl who, up until her tenth birthday, flew with a series of ‘fluid like beings that were dressed in material that barely covered and was white and thin and always flowing as they too never touched the ground although [they] had legs and feet’. After a secret signal had been given she and these fairies would fly around the rooftops together: the girl would decide where they would go and the flights were a ‘treat’ (§338).

There is an impressive psychological literature on children’s invisible friends and serious studies dating back to before the Second World War (Svendsen 1934; Singer and Singer 1990, 89-116; Taylor 1999; and a sometimes perplexing approach to the question Hallowell 2007, for whom invisible friends are real). However, the most recent and authoritative publications suggest that children are fully conscious that their ‘friends’ are make believe or pretend (Taylor 1999, 86-117). In the *Fairy Census* adults remembering these childhood friendships believe, instead, in their reality. In fact, there is only one of the sixteen identified here where grown children express doubts in that respect: ‘I’m still convinced, even after all these years, that I saw them, but whether they were a part of our reality or a creation of my own mind, I don’t know’ (§167). Are we dealing with tricks played by memory? Over rationalization on the part of psychologists interested in invisible friends? Or are we simply looking at a different if related phenomenon? Relationships with invisible friends, it must be said, are often also rather deeper than many of those described here: can a box of hostile gnomes, who remain out of sight most of the time (§94), or some anthropomorphic wisps of mist really be described as ‘friends’ (§195)? Note also that frequently the child in the *Fairy Census* enters a relationship with a collective: a group of fairies playing in the flowers (§283), or the fairy fliers who navigate with a child around the skies of New York state (§338). This is untypical of documented invisible friends, though apparently not unprecedented (Hallowell 2007, 43).

In other respects there is some overlap with the experience of invisible friends. The most convincing explanation for invisible friends is loneliness and isolation and, in a

number of cases, fairy friends appear under these conditions. 'I was about seven years old. (1953). I had been sharing a bedroom with my elder brother, who was about eighteen at the time, but he left to join the army. So, I was left on my own in the room.' 'I went to sleep as normal, but woke after a time to find a group of the little people dancing around on the floor at the head of my bed.' 'This went on for some months on a more or less nightly basis, but gradually the interval between appearances became longer and longer until it stopped altogether' (§167). Here it could be argued that the fairies were a balm for a child who was now sleeping alone, and a balm that gradually became less and less important. We have, likewise, a Canadian boy. 'It was a repeating experience. One which occurred to me as a young child recovering from polio. I was rather a lonely kid, both shy and fierce' (§195). Or the recent emigrant perhaps missing home: 'We had not been long in Australia. I was walking with my father and we saw the fairies in the trees. They were smallish, very bright and you could see their forms within the lights... I thought they had come from England to see us' (§471). A girl in her very early teens after describing an infant fairy experience writes: 'Please show me how to meet a fairy in a week. I need to know. I need to have someone to talk to about my problems that isn't fully human. Someone that I can keep as a secret friend' (§415).

I will finish this section with a particularly striking encounter. Here we do not have a fairy friendship in the sense of a long-term relationship, but a six-year-old American girl who socializes, in the 1970s, with some local fairies.

...I was playing in the empty lot next to my house and suddenly, I was in a forest. The fairies were tall and they fed me a drink and cakes that were very sweet and seemed to be made of light. It was dark, but it wasn't because it seemed like light emanated from the trees. After a couple of hours a woman told me I had to go back. I didn't want to go back and complained. She told me I had to because I had a purpose. Suddenly, I woke up on the floor of my living room. I don't remember getting there or leaving the open lot where I was running around and playing. I felt like I had lost time (§376).

This account, remembered some forty years after it happened, by a woman who claims to have 'regular' supernatural experiences, is remarkable in several respects. There is the eating of fairy food: a fundamental symbolic act in fairy tradition (Cutchin 2015) and there is the lost time, which is so often found in folklore and anomalistic experiences (Briggs 2003 [1976], 398-400). Similar descriptions are found in relation to the White Sabbath, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where, men and women described going to join the fairy revels (Goodare 2012). It is jarring to find such an account in Texas, of all places, in the 1970s. Did the respondent somehow pick up these themes from popular culture (reading, or films or radio)? Chris Woodyard has pointed out to me the parallels with alien abduction lore. Was it a reconstructed memory from later in life?

Conclusion and Spiritual Development

Eighty-eight fairy experiences of children aged from about three to ten, from the second half of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century, have furnished us with some data on fairy encounters among the very young. On the evidence of this collection fairy encounters tend to be had, or at least remembered and shared by girls or women recalling childhood. Most of these memories involve fairy experiences in bedrooms or in natural settings, particularly gardens: adults have a far wider range of locations for their fairy experiences, and this probably reflects their greater freedom in the world. Children have more sleep-related fairy experiences than adults: these typically involve small fairies in large groups. In natural settings children focus their experiences on trees: there is little of the interest in the flowers so common in contemporary adult fairy experiences. In some cases fairies become a fixture in the life of a child, and here parallels with the psychological literature on 'invisible friends' are intriguing. Let me conclude now with some thoughts about the role of these fairy experiences in the spiritual lives of those who replied to the survey.

Fascinatingly, these childhood fairy experiences continued to be important for many of the respondents: something particularly interesting given the way that fairies are often ridiculed in western societies (Young 2018b).⁷ 21.59% of these grown children thought of their fairy encounter as marking a turning point in their lives: lower, interestingly, than adolescents and adults who had encounters, respectively, 26.08% and 27.13%. On several occasions the respondent returned to the site of the encounter as an adult. 'I went back to the alley of my childhood a few years ago, but my [fairy] friends were no longer there' (§283). A woman returned to the scene of her fairy encounter in Scotland: 'Five years ago, some twenty-nine years after this happened, I went back to the house that this happened in' (§173). She discovered that the house was haunted. One woman had dreams about the place where she saw her fairy: and later took photographs, in the area, in which she could pick out fairies (§100). In other cases the memory remained a happy one: 'a fond vivid memory of my childhood' (§335), as one respondent put it. The fairies left 'me cheered up and with a memory for life' (§111); 'I treasure that memory, it is very, very, special to me' (§170); '[o]ne of the most magical experiences of my life' (§285).

Does the experience actually help form later religious beliefs and convictions? One might have thought that fairy experiences were most easily reconciled, in religious terms, to some form of neo-paganism: 'I believe and respect the fae... now as a practicing Wiccan' (§61) was the comment of one grown child who had experienced fairies. Another contributor referred, instead, to syncretic beliefs in his family: 'As a child I was a Christian who was raised to believe that fairies could keep plants alive and healthy' (§249). However, for the most part the very lack of references to

⁷ A correspondent wrote in response to Young 2018b, 7 Apr 2018: 'I attend local pagan meet ups and whilst there's a lot of discussion on everything from Anglo Saxon herbal texts to Viking mythology, ancient druids to Neopaganism... I feel thoroughly embarrassed to bring up fairies! It's just not a subject taken seriously and I think there's always that slight fear someone will immediately presume that you're interested in cute winged Victorian fairies and flower fairies and spend your weekends wearing glittery pink tutus!'

conventional religious beliefs is striking. Clearly, many contributors had a rich spiritual life, which included many supernatural experiences. But these seem to have been part of private patchwork mythology.

I have no idea if this is related [to my experience], but I am forty years old and still appear to be in my early twenties... Good genes, a result of my encounter, or something else, I don't know. There is also a bit of strangeness about my conception, I have often wondered if my parents are entirely my parents (§388).

As I live, I feel this certain type of feeling, like a vibe or an aura, with almost everything I do, and that's how my memories are kept as well. There is a different type of feel to a fairy encounter vs. an alien encounter vs. a ghost encounter (§366).

23% of those writing in about childhood experiences claimed that they have 'regular' supernatural experiences and 48% said that they have 'occasional' supernatural experiences. In some cases, these early fairy experiences marked the beginning of a life-long series that proved fundamental to the subject's identity. Take, for example, the adult who considered the fairies that flew in her window in the 1970s when she was eight or nine: to be 'possibly my first calling to the occult' (§61). A six year old Texan girl was, it will be remembered, briefly kidnapped by fairies in the 1970s and was happy with them: 'I didn't want to go back and complained. [The fairy leader] told me I had to because I had a purpose' (§376). This woman, also, went on to have 'regular' supernatural experiences. In other cases, a fairy experience marked a child's imaginative life: 'I'm a bestselling, award-winning author of fantasy, horror, science-fiction, paranormal, and action-adventure short stories, novels, comic books, and screenplays. My personal encounters with faeries, and other non-human beings have been a huge defining force where my writing is concerned' (§353).

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