



Hans Christian Andersen: The Life of a Storyteller

Jackie Wullschlager

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Others before him collected and retold folk stories and fairy tales, but Hans Christian Andersen was the first to create them himself. The universal familiarity of such stories as “The Ugly Duckling,” “The Little Mermaid” and “The Emperor’s New Clothes” shows how successful he was. By the time he reached middle age in the 1840s, in fact, he was probably the most famous writer in Europe, on familiar terms with kings and princes and eagerly read by a huge audience.

Yet the image of Andersen that has come down to us—that of the amiable, childlike storyteller—is bitterly at odds with the reality. In this groundbreaking biography, the first serious and comprehensive study of Andersen and his work to be undertaken in English, Jackie Wullschlager brings out the true nature of his life. Born the son of a dirt-poor cobbler and an illiterate washerwoman in a provincial Danish city, he indeed fought his way to fame in spite of his circumstances. But if his rise was astonishing, it was rarely happy. Lonely, sexually confused, vain, anxious and hypochondriacal, Andersen was driven by ambitions that, despite the power and brilliance of his work, prevented his ever being satisfied. A signal achievement of Wullschlager’s account is to show with great clarity how Andersen’s art—darker and more diverse than previously recognized—emerged directly from the complexities of his life.

Jackie Wullschlager has returned to all the original sources in Danish and German, and has followed Andersen’s footsteps across Europe. Her evocation of his world—Golden Age Copenhagen, the princely courts of Germany and the country villas of the Danish aristocracy, the languid warmth of southern Italy, which released his creativity—is unforgettable. She has recovered censored passages from his letters and journals that make plain how his deepest personal relationships, though often frustrated, were with other men. In her words, Andersen emerges in all his fascinating, cross-grained charm and gawkishness, his desperation and his occasional joy, as a writer—and a man—quite unlike any other.

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