

A Prospectus For

*The Fairy Tales of*  
**Oscar Wilde**

With Nineteen Drawings by SANDOW BIRK

and an Introduction by MERLIN HOLLAND

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in both Standard and Deluxe Editions

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) wrote his “fairy tales” in two installments, at a pivotal point in his career. *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, envisioned as a collection of children’s stories, was published in 1888, while Wilde was still serving as the editor of *The Lady’s World*, to all appearances happily married with children. The second collection, *A House of Pomegranates*, dedicated to his wife, Constance, was published in 1891. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published in the same year, marking a period of intense creativity for Wilde.

While *The Happy Prince* is more lighthearted, intended for a younger audience, *A House of Pomegranates* exists in a darker realm. The two collections bracket a period of turmoil for Wilde, both personal and professional. Read together, they illuminate topics and themes that Wilde must have been striving to understand: death and redemption, power and humility, friendship and subservience. When these two sets of stories are read together and considered in their historical context, they offer an opportunity to absorb these themes through allegory and symbol; they are, according to Wilde, “many-sided, as I think symbolism should be.”

Accompanied by the drawings of artist Sandow Birk, whose images deftly extract messages from the stories and capture them in the light of modern-day, the Arion Press edition of *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* is an essential piece in the puzzle of the writer’s work. Birk’s artworks capture both the contradiction and the complexity of the stories, illuminating their timeless themes through imagery that bears a startling and immediate familiarity to today’s reader. The stark lines and style might at first trick an unsuspecting viewer into believing they do hail from Victorian times, but the content is very much of the now.

Indeed, the author’s grandson, Merlin Holland, who wrote the introduction for this edition, advises readers to hold an attitude of “both/and” rather than “either/or” as they read the collections. It is not hard to see the characters and themes as symbols and messages; in this

way, Wilde's tales behave like any other allegory. But they are also far stranger and more unpredictable, and therein lies their charm. Characters who might, in another writer's hands, meet a bad end are shown a measure of grace and dignity, even as their flaws are exposed. And those who, like the Swallow, seem flighty and self-centered, are allowed rare depth and shown to change over time.

While many of the stories are tinged with or even shadowed by darkness, they also bear Wilde's characteristic humor and élan. Their craft, both in symbol and in storyline, renders them immersive. As Wilde once explained, "My fairy tales ... are an attempt to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality—to deal with modern problems in a mode that is ideal and not imitative." He went on to add, "They are, of course, slight and fanciful, and written, not for children, but for childlike people from eighteen to eighty!"

#### THE ARTIST

Los Angeles artist Sandow Birk is a graduate of the Otis/Parson's Art Institute. Frequently developed as expansive, multi-media projects, his works emphasize social issues: inner city violence, graffiti, political issues, travel, war, and prisons, as well as surfing and skateboarding. He has received an NEA International Travel Grant, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Fulbright Fellowship, a Getty Fellowship, and a City of Los Angeles (COLA) Fellowship. He was an artist in residence at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC in 2007, and at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris in 2008.

He was also artist in residence at the Ballinglen Arts Foundation in rural County Mayo, Ireland, in 2011, 2016, and most recently in 2018, where he worked on this project for Arion Press. Accompanied by his wife, the artist Elyse Pignolet, and their children, Birk was inspired by the landscape and quiet life of rural Ireland. With a crackling fire and a nip of Jameson, he "attempted to make (Wilde's) moral visions relevant to our own troubled times ... to create not just an illustrated book, but something more thought provoking and enduring."

Birk is represented by Catharine Clark Gallery in San Francisco, P.P.O.W. Gallery in New York City, Koplín del Río Gallery in Seattle, and Track 16 Gallery in Los Angeles. Arion Press is grateful to Robert Mailer Anderson and Chris Dunlap for introducing us to one another.

#### THE INTRODUCTION

Merlin Holland, the only grandson of Oscar Wilde, is an author living in France. For the last thirty years he has been researching his grandfather's life and works. His publications include *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess*, the first complete, verbatim record of the libel trial which ultimately brought Oscar Wilde to ruin and social



*Illustration for "The Happy Prince"*

disgrace, and *The Wilde Album*, a pictorial biography of Oscar Wilde. He is also the co-editor of *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* and author of *Coffee with Oscar Wilde*, a series of imaginary conversations between Merlin Holland and his grandfather. At present he is working on an account of Oscar's "posthumous life" which will show that his grandfather has caused even more trouble after his death than when he was alive. After Oscar's conviction in 1895, his wife Constance and their two sons were forced to move abroad and change their name to Holland. The family has never reverted to the name Wilde.

#### THE EDITION

The book is quarto in format, 12-1/4 x 8-1/4 inches, 152 pages. The type is Bookman in Monotype and hand composition, ornamented with initial Phyllis capitals. Sandow Birk has created nineteen original drawings that have been reproduced by polymer plates. In addition to the frontispiece, "Love and Death," each of the nine stories is depicted by both a full-page image and a smaller vignette. The type and artwork have been printed by letterpress on mouldmade Magnani 90gsm Raffaello.

The 225-copy standard edition has decorative initials printed in green ink. It is machine-sewn; bound with an olive green cloth spine and paper sides imprinted with titling and a foil stamped butterfly; and housed in a slipcase. The 25-copy deluxe edition has decorative initials foil stamped in 22k gold. It is handsewn with linen thread and silk headbands; bound in half olive green leather with cloth sides and gold titling; and housed in a slipcase. The total edition is limited to 250 copies for sale. All are signed by the artist, and the deluxe edition is also signed by Merlin Holland. An additional 26 lettered copies hors de commerce have been reserved for complimentary distribution to participants.

Current subscribers will be offered the first opportunity to purchase the deluxe edition, and five copies have been reserved for new subscribers—please contact us for details. Other customers may add their names to a reservation list. The price for the standard edition is \$800 (\$560 subscription); the price for the deluxe edition is \$2,200 (\$1,760 for current subscribers). To reserve a copy or request further information about the subscription program discounts, please contact:

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