

Spinning Silver: From Short Story to Novel

Erika Gotfredson: Hi everyone, and welcome to our first Big Read podcast! I'm Erika Gotfredson, and I am here with Narim Kim and Vanessa Iacocca. Today we're going to be discussing the similarities and the differences between "Spinning Silver," which was originally written as a short story and then later as a novel. So we will be discussing the similarities and differences between those two texts. So what I'm going to ask my friends here to do is to first introduce themselves by giving us their name, their year in graduate school—all three of us are Ph.D. students—and then also their relationship to the short story. I'll round us off, and then we'll move into our discussion for today. So Narim, would you open us up, please?

Narim Kim: Sure. Hi, I'm Narim, and I'm a third-year Ph.D. student in the English department. And last year I read this novel, *Spinning Silver*, in a course while I was prepping to teach literature in college, and just recently I read the short story, and I found it really interesting to go from the novel to the short story, so I'm really excited for our conversation today.

Erika Gotfredson: Awesome, welcome. Alright, Vanessa, how about you?

Vanessa Iacocca: Hi everyone! I'm Vanessa. I'm a fourth-year Ph.D. student in the English department as well. And I get to teach *Spinning Silver* in my "Science Fiction and Fantasy" literature course this semester. We're in the middle of going over it actually this week, so I'm really excited to get to talk about some of the themes that we've already been covering. In particular, we've been focusing on medievalism and the reinterpretation of the Rumpelstiltskin folktale—that's been our focus. So it will also be nice to venture outside that [by] talking about the short story.

Erika Gotfredson: Do you want to give your students a shout-out?

Vanessa Iacocca: Hey guys!

Erika Gotfredson: Awesome, welcome to any of Vanessa's students who are tuning in! And as I mentioned, I am Erika. I am a third-year Ph.D. student in the Literature, Theory, Culture program—we're all three in that program in the English department. I'm teaching "Intro to Fiction" this semester with an awesome group of students, and so we have not started reading this book yet but will be in a few weeks. And we're specifically going to be looking at the short story versus the novel as a way to talk about different elements of fiction that show up in the two different versions of the text. So we're going to dive in. First, I want to give a super brief spoiler alert to anyone listening: We will be talking about both texts in full, including the conclusions. Our final segment will be on conclusions, so if you haven't read the entire book, just know that we might be spoiling it, so listen accordingly. Alright, so I'm going to start with a brief summary of specifically the short story and then how the novel differs a little bit, and then we'll dive into our three segments for today. So the short story version of "Spinning Silver" was published in an anthology called *The Starlit Wood: New Fairy Tales*, and this anthology was published in 2017. And then the novel came out in 2018. And so we can read the short story as almost a precursor to the novel in which Novik is working through her ideas in prepping for the novel. The interesting thing is, I think all three of us here read the novel first and then went back to the short story, so

we didn't necessarily read it in that order, and I imagine most people listening are doing the same thing. But let's go through what the short story specifically covers. And so we have a story about Miryem, who takes on the money-lending business when her mother becomes ill from the intense winter that they're experiencing. Her father isn't very good at the job, and so she takes over as a way to bring in more money and ensure that her mother gets the resources that she needs to become healthy again. She becomes quite good at it, Miryem does, but her parents aren't necessarily happy with her because the money-lending process requires that she become cold to the people around her. And so they're not actually excited that she has taken over the family business. Her grandfather, however, is happy because he is also a moneylender, and he helps her grow the business. Once she begins to become rich, the Saryk king of a different kingdom starts to notice that she is so good at what she does, and three times he has her change silver into gold to give back to him. She does this every time by using a jewelry maker named Isaac to make jewelry for the Duke and his daughter, and then the Saryk king says that if she's able to do all three tasks successfully he will marry her. And so [in] the final moment of the text, we see that Miryem actually is able to talk her way out of that situation and convince the Saryk lord that she plays a better role for him as someone that will just change money for him and not as his wife. And so the [short] story ends there. In the novel version of this story, one of the things that we're going to talk about is that there are numerous other characters that also have chapters and sections of the text that follow their stories, but, specifically focused on Miryem and her storyline within the text, we see that the same things happen [as in the short story], but then in that final moment, Miryem is not able to talk her way out of the Saryk lord wanting her as his wife. And she is taken to the kingdom, becomes his wife, and then the rest of the story follows their relationship and her navigating what her role is in the Saryk kingdom. Specifically, we eventually learn that the Saryk king has taken Miryem in order to change silver into gold as a way of prolonging winter for his kingdom and sustaining his community and his people. She is not very happy about being there, has a plan in place to have him murdered, but then once he's captured, she starts to feel bad. She starts to realize that he's doing this as a way of protecting his own people, and she starts to feel bad for that, and she ends up releasing him. They save his kingdom together at the same time that they kill...kill the demon?

Vanessa Iacocca: Expel him?

Erika Gotfredson: Expel the demon—maybe that's a better way of saying it. Thank you for that, Vanessa.

Vanessa Iacocca: It's not an exact science, is it?

Erika Gotfredson: Exactly. And both kingdoms—the sunlit kingdom and the Saryk kingdom—are then safe at the end, and Miryem decides to marry the Saryk king and remain in their kingdom, only visiting her family every so often. So we have two very different stories that are occurring here in terms of Miryem's relationship with the Saryk kingdom, her relationship with the Saryk king specifically. And so here's what we're going to do: We're going to have three different segments, the second two are going to talk about the point of view specifically—the numerous narrators of the novel versus just the single point of view in the short story—and then our final segment will talk about the conclusions, these vastly different endings that Miryem gets. But let's start with our first segment, segment number one, that's going to talk about the

idea of what a short story is versus a novel. And so what I mean by this is, the short story is about 25 pages. A short story, because it's short, is expected to follow one chain of related events and then conclude, whereas the novel has 400-500 pages to develop numerous storylines, numerous perspectives. And so one of the things that comes out of even this inherent genre difference is that there are a lot more details in the novel than there are in the short story, just inherently by the length of the two texts. For reference, the novel spends about 120 pages covering what the short story does in 25 pages. So one of the things that shows up in the differences is who the Saryk are and what relationship the Saryk kingdom has to the text. [In] the short story, we don't get a lot of interaction with the Saryk kingdom. It's just really the Saryk king coming in and looking for the money being exchanged, but then he leaves and that's the end of it, whereas in the novel Miryem gets to go, and we learn more about these people. We see their land; we see their home. How did you both find specifically the Saryk kingdom showing up in these two different texts? How did that create the reading experience that you have or maybe tailor the way that you felt about each of these stories?

Vanessa Iacocca: I am a massive fan of world-building in fantasy and in general, so I really enjoyed seeing the Saryk kingdom in more detail. And it did have a lot of intricacies—the moving walls and the under-Earth aspects, I thought, were really creative and imaginative. And we really got an idea of their perspectives and their culture, etc., [so] that [their presence] wasn't just that creepy, dangerous, looming force that I felt it was more in the short story. And as Miryem comes to sympathize with the Saryk people, we do too. And it just sticks with me in the novel at one point that she says something like, "I'm the monster in the narrative of my village," and you see her relating to the Saryks as monsters in that capacity, as outsiders. And it makes me think about her Jewish identity—if that's where the connection's happening—and we're not able to get that in the short story, so that's one of my favorite differences, I would say, between the novel and the short story.

Narim Kim: Yeah, [in] the short story I felt quite detached from Miryem, the narrator, in comparison to how immersed I was in the novel because we not only engage with her for a literally longer time, but we also see her in different situations, especially in this weird kingdom. And I thought that was really interesting to see, and it really helped me develop an emotional bond with her more than [in] the short story.

Erika Gotfredson: Absolutely.

Narim Kim: Because in the short story a lot of emphasis is on her logical thinking—the smart businesswoman discovering her ability to make money, be an entrepreneur—but in the novel, it's more like her interacting with way more characters more in depth. That's the main difference that I noticed.

Erika Gotfredson: I love both of these points that you're bringing up because I think they convey for us even subtle differences in who Miryem becomes when we have twenty-five pages versus 500 pages. So as Narim brought up, in the short story version we don't have her interactions with any of the people from the Saryk kingdom besides the king himself, and so I think it's totally right that the Saryk remain mysterious. We don't have an idea of who they are, and so in these moments, the story becomes: Miryem is really good at what she's doing. She

steps up in a time when her family really needs her in order to make money to give her mother the things that she needs in order to not be sick anymore. And so we see [Miryem] progressively get better at this role that she has taken on, and then it pays off in this final moment where she's able to use the capabilities that she's developed to convince the Saryk king that he doesn't actually want to marry her. In the novel, all of that is in 120 pages, but then it's almost like the text is so beautifully long that we even forget about these initial moments, as such a big portion of the text is spent with her actually in the kingdom. And so, her money-lending business and the business capabilities that she built are still a very important part of her story, but she also develops and has to learn lessons about how to care for people and that *she does* care about people even beyond her family bubble that she had originally thought were the people that she was doing this for. She builds connections with the people in the Saryk kingdom that she didn't expect. Did you have something to say, Vanessa?

Vanessa Iacocca: Absolutely. We see her create “chosen family.” She has close connections with obviously her parents but also Wanda and Irina, but also [with those] who used to be Saryk servants. And that chosen element, I think, is so important, having parallels again with Jewish diaspora—just the idea of creating community in somewhat less conventional ways or at least outside of the greater population. And I really enjoyed seeing her lose some of the coldness also because we see that grow so much at the beginning of the novel that by the end it's chipped away.

Erika Gotfredson: I agree with that. Reading [about] this coldness that she has to have as she's going and beating on people's doors and asking them for money, there was part of me that was [thinking], “Rock on, girl. You do the things that you need to do in order to provide for your family.” But then it's also a touching narrative to have the moments where she has these people that have been, like you said, Vanessa, monsters in her world, and she's able to realize—even without actively wanting necessarily to enter into relationships with them, she's literally taken from her home and planted in theirs—that she still builds connections without even meaning to necessarily and has these really touching connections. And so we definitely see lessons that she's learning even about her own capabilities as the text progresses.

Vanessa Iacocca: And she is such a survivalist, so I'm not putting her down for being cold at the beginning. I, too, [am] like, “Go, girl!”

Erika Gotfredson: Yeah!

Vanessa Iacocca: So much of the novel is about survival for all of the characters, but for there to be collaboration in survival is one of the most powerful messages I took.

Narim Kim: Yeah, I agree. I also think in the novel version there's more room for other characters, not just Miryem, to show other aspects of themselves, especially the Saryk king. I thought it was hilarious how he hates having to consummate their marriage, and he just really doesn't want to. That's not in the [short] story at all. And I thought the dynamic between him and Miryem was really interesting, and that makes the interesting move of making the villain figure not conventional, right? So, it also made us think about masculinity as well, the expectations of a king, right?

Erika Gotfredson: Absolutely.

Narim Kim: So yeah, the novel is much more interesting in that aspect.

Erika Gotfredson: So I think that this might be a good place to segue into our second segment, which I think will be my favorite, because even as I'm listening to what you're saying, Narim, I'm [thinking that] this storyline doesn't just happen with Miryem. It happens elsewhere as well. So our second segment is going to be specifically on the differences in the short story, which is told in first-person from Miryem's perspective, versus the novel which, by the end of it, has six narrators, which is a lot of narrators. And the story builds them, they progress. So correct me, you both, if you think differently, but I feel like the main three and maybe the three that we'll focus on the most are Miryem, Wanda, and Irina. They are the three that are established at the beginning. They're three powerful and impressive women, and the novel does the work of interweaving their stories in really interesting and intricate ways. And so I think this is a great segue to just open up the conversation [to ask]: How were the stories different when we're just focused on Miryem? We've already established that Miryem's character and her trajectory differ just based on how she interacts with the Staryk kingdom. But how does the story differ when we have just Miryem's perspective versus the perspectives of three women whose lives are interrelated in ways that are really beautiful and interesting? How does that change the story?

Narim Kim: Well, it changes everything, doesn't it?

Erika Gotfredson: Yeah, exactly.

Narim Kim: The whole message is different. I don't speak for everyone, but [in] the short story, I feel like the message was just this female character finding some sort of agency in this world that is very sexist and anti-Jew and capitalist, right? But in the novel, the message is friendship and helping each other out. So it was really interesting to see that the message itself changed so much from the first version to the second version, which made me think about the actual original which is Rumpelstiltskin, the fairytale. Is it a fairytale or folktale—I don't know? But, I mean, obviously the title itself and the main concept—spinning silver or hay into gold—is from that story. And I'm not sure what to make of the differences between that and the short story and the novel. It's interesting. It makes me think.

Erika Gotfredson: There are so many different layers, yeah.

Narim Kim: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Erika Gotfredson: Vanessa, what about you?

Vanessa Iacocca: Well, now I'm thinking about Rumpelstiltskin and hay to gold and all that. But [with] the three different women negotiating unsafe domestic spheres [and] forced marriages, I think bringing up these questions of things like consent and, as Narim brought up, obviously agency—it's really interesting to get to see the different nuances or different responses to limitations caused by oppressive husbands or fathers, etc. And I found it particularly

interesting to look at someone like Irina who is tsarina. She's still having to navigate just as terrifying circumstances as Wanda and Miryem. As Erika mentioned, getting to see from the first person allows so many more insights because we actually see the characters have the same thoughts sometimes.

Erika Gotfredson: Exactly.

Narim Kim: Right, right.

Vanessa Iacocca: Remember when Irina and Miryem see each other and notice that they have something in common? From both perspectives, you see that both of them felt that resonance.

Erika Gotfredson: Yes, yes! So I love this idea of similar circumstances that are coming up in all of their stories. Well, I don't love the circumstances that are coming up.

Vanessa Iacocca: Thanks for clarifying.

Narim Kim: Not great.

Erika Gotfredson: Clarification: I don't love the fact that they all are having to navigate situations in which external circumstances are trying to force marriages on them that they are not particularly excited about. However, the idea that we have stories told from each of their points of view as they are navigating these situations as well as how we have such a wide span of socioeconomic identities—so we have Wanda who is working-class, we have Miryem who maybe would be classified as middle-class, and then we have Irina, obviously, who enters into a very lucrative marriage and is top dog in the kingdom and in a very impressive position—and yet still, despite these vast differences in their identities, their circumstances, their stories, they are all experiencing confining environments that are trying to put them in marriages they don't want to be in. With Wanda, she ends up obviously not getting married and being adopted eventually into Miryem's family, but with Miryem and Irina, they are eventually married, and so I think in all three we get to see how they are adapting and how they are still trying to carve out space for their own desires and needs and agency even within the circumstances that they find themselves in, which they don't necessarily always have control over. So I like that the stories are so widely different at the same time that they are so similar. Let me ask about the moments that the stories overlap, like the [moments] where we find that Wanda and Miryem's stories are so intricately connected. We have Wanda, who literally realizes that her ability to leave her family home and work with Miryem's family relies on the success of Miryem's business, and then Miryem's ability to exchange the Saryk silver into gold relies on Irina's father purchasing the things as her dowry for her eventual marriage. And [the connections] become even more intricate, right? We see in the end all three of them are working together to pit the two husbands against each other, and Irina helps Wanda out of her circumstance with the death of her father. So all of them are overlapping. Did you love that as much as me? I thought it was beautiful.

Narim Kim: I liked it because, for one, it's beautiful, but at the same time it doesn't romanticize female friendship, which is really easy to do. [It's] like, I see a woman, and I like her because she's a woman. No, it's not that. I have my interests and her interests, and it's when I see that my

interests are aligned with her interests that I help her and she helps me. And that's how a really constructive friendship—or maybe friendship's not the word—a really constructive bond is set up, and we're able to help each other move forward. So, we don't see in the novel ever Miryem and Wanda becoming best friends. It's not that. They don't connect on an emotional level. It's just, I understand your situation, you understand mine, let's help each other out. So, yeah, I thought that was really smart and well done.

Erika Gotfredson: Vanessa, I want to let you talk in a second, but I want to also go back to the point that I think you made in connection with [a point that] Narim made about the moment where Miryem brings the crown to Irina, and she's watching Irina put the crown on, and as she's leaving, she says something along the lines of, "I wonder if she has as [little] power in her situation as I do." She's basically ruminating on how their circumstances or their lack of power in those two situations...

Narim Kim: But then she never does get to interact with her, and the story ends with [Miryem] thinking [Irina] looks happy.

Erika Gotfredson: Oh, in the short story?

Vanessa Iacocca: Oh yeah!

Narim Kim: Yeah, yeah.

Erika Gotfredson: So in the short story, they really don't interact. We have Wanda and Irina who are just minor figures in the text. We don't have any—I think the word I'm looking for is "repetition." I think that the idea of numerous points of view, numerous narrators that are telling different versions of the same story, repeats the idea that this isn't a single experience, this isn't a single woman who has been confined within her marriage circumstances. This is repeated again and again and again, and so it builds this idea of it not being a singular experience but almost a trend amongst women across socioeconomic class. Vanessa, I think I cut you off, so why don't you chime in here?

Vanessa Iacocca: Just to add onto what you're saying: To have a broader theme, then, of female empowerment, having these linking stories really lends to that. When you were initially talking, what I first thought of wasn't just how the women lift each other up in more concrete ways, but [also] ideologically essentially. This really stuck with me: In the novel when Wanda is going to be essentially sold in exchange for regular liquor for her father, she thinks about how Miryem can't help her in this situation. [It's] right before she says "no," and there's so much emphasis on that "no," and it comes up again and again and again from other people's "no's" being so important. But what inspires her in that moment is Miryem, and I just think that idea of female empowerment is...

Narim Kim: [Miryem's] a role model, yeah.

Vanessa Iacocca: Yeah, in more subconscious ways.

Narim Kim: Yeah, yeah, I agree.

Erika Gotfredson: In both circumstances, Miryem references both Wanda and Irina as sisters too. And so I think you're right, Narim, that we don't see a lot of emotional development in terms of connections between the two sets of women—I'm thinking here of Wanda and Miryem, and then Miryem and Irina—because their lives are so busy that they don't have time to just sit around and drink tea and gossip about all the things that are happening in their lives. They have so much going on. And so the story isn't devoted to heavily building these relationships. But we also have a moment where Miryem looks at Irina and goes, "I feel like we're sisters because our situations are so similar." And then at the end—I'm talking about the novel here specifically—when Miryem comes back from the Staryk kingdom and sees how her parents and Wanda and her siblings have built this...What was the phrase that you used at the beginning, Vanessa, about families that develop in unconventional ways?

Vanessa Iacocca: Chosen families?

Erika Gotfredson: Chosen families, I like that. And we see it in all three stories, in terms of Irina and her nurse as well being a chosen family, so we see this idea of chosen families [repeated] too. Anyways, Miryem comes home and sees this built family of her parents and then Wanda and her siblings, and she calls Wanda a sister, and she calls Sergey and Stepon brothers. And so even if we haven't had the space to see their relationships develop, we still know that there is a deep bond. I like that word that you used, Narim—bond. They rely on each other. They have each other's backs, and they realize that their success—so Miryem's success, Wanda's success, Irina's success—all depend on the success of the other women. And so their stories, they are so beautifully connected.

Narim Kim: Yeah, I think it just starts from that recognition that my situation is hinged on yours, and then it leads to this more emotional connection.

Vanessa Iacocca: Well, and it's nice to have less of an ugly bond. There are a lot of bonds and restraints in this text, [so it's nice] having more positive bonds.

Narim Kim: I mean, there was this one moment when Miryem was jealous of her cousin—I forgot her name.

Erika Gotfredson: Basia?

Narim Kim: I don't know, but her female cousin, and it didn't really develop that emotion for me.

Vanessa Iacocca: In the short story?

Narim Kim: In the novel.

Vanessa Iacocca: Oh, in the novel.

Narim Kim: Yeah.

Erika Gotfredson: So for clarification, one of the differences between the short story and the novel is the role that Isaac plays in the two texts. Isaac is the jewelry maker that Miryem uses. In the short story, we get subtle indications that Miryem herself might be developing feelings for Isaac, and then at the end, after she has navigated her way out of marrying the Saryk king, she makes the comment that Isaac continues to visit as a way of maybe suggesting to us that a relationship is budding between the two of them. In the novel, that's completely different. Isaac is never available as a partner for Miryem. Instead, Isaac is interested in Miryem's cousin, and they end up getting married, which the wedding is where the big climactic moment of the text happens. I do think it's interesting—and maybe this can be our way of maneuvering into the final segment—[that] in both versions Isaac is a way of thinking about what marriage means for Miryem because in one he's a potential suitor. In the novel, she's not interested in Isaac, but she's interested in the life that Isaac and her cousin are able to have. She says, "I'm not interested, but I'm jealous that she gets to have some semblance of a normal life in ways that I won't, now that I've entered into this financial deal with the Saryk king." So for our third segment, our final segment, let's talk about the conclusion of these two stories. So obviously in the short story version, we get Miryem who is able to talk her way basically out of marrying the Saryk king. He realizes that it's more beneficial to keep her as someone who just makes money for him, who changes silver to gold, instead of actually marrying her. In the novel, she has no such capabilities. Instead, she is taken off in his fancy sleigh to this kingdom and is used to make more money and spends a lot of time in the text navigating what her life looks like there. So very different stories. All of that to say, in the ending of the novel, we have a re-marriage: Miryem and the Saryk king actually do end up together after Miryem has put so much emphasis on making it back to her family and wanting to return back to her normal life. We see them decide to enter into an actual, maybe healthier partnership together in the novel's conclusion. Vastly different experiences that Narim...Narim?

Narim Kim: Am I on your mind?

Erika Gotfredson: Do you want to go experience the Saryk kingdom? Excuse me! *Miryem* has such vastly different experiences. What did you make of these two different conclusions?

Narim Kim: Who wants to go first?

Vanessa Iacocca: Narim, you have an insider's view being a doppelganger of Miryem.

Narim Kim: Hilarious. Okay, so I found both endings quite surprising. The novel's ending was more surprising for me. But after the initial shock, after sitting down and thinking about it, it did make sense, both of them. So I think what Novik, the author of the two texts, is trying to do is find a balance between showing her female characters agency while also reminding readers that this is an oppressive system in which this female character, regardless of how much agency she does have, is still oppressed. There are limits. So in the short story, it ends with her refusing the role of wife but taking on the role of banker and literally forever being the Saryk king's servant because he's going to keep giving her silver. And she ends the story with saying, "Every so often this bag of silver comes up, and I have to change it." So it was a powerful ending in the sense

that it reminded me that it's a capitalist system and there is this boss that's controlling Miryem, although she has more agency than when she first started out. And then in the novel, we've already seen her by the end become attached to the people in the ice kingdom...ice kingdom? In the winter world. So for her to just give that up doesn't make sense. We know she's a good person by now, and also she has had time to really know the Saryk king, so she's acting based on what she knows. So the contrast between the first marriage and the second marriage shows that Miryem has obtained a level of agency that is greater than what she had, and she's acting based on this belief in herself as a potentially good leader who can help people who need her help. So yeah, when I think about it, it does make sense. I don't love it, but it's just me because I don't like romance in novels.

Erika Gotfredson: I am fascinated by what you said because I, on a surface level, think that the short story ending is more satisfying because she isn't forced into a marriage that she doesn't want to be in in the first place. But then you flipped that on its head for me when you reminded us that she's not free. She's still in this weird position where she has to turn money into gold for the Saryk king basically whenever he wants. So it's not like she is completely just doing whatever she wants. And so that was a good reminder to me too that the satisfaction that I get purely from her escaping this marriage that in the first place she doesn't want—in either text she doesn't want it, and she is successfully able to get out of it [in the short story]—is actually a little bit more complicated. She's still in this subservient relationship to the Saryk king even if it doesn't come with the extra responsibilities of being his wife and the queen of this kingdom. Vanessa, what do you think?

Vanessa Iacocca: I thought of the short story as a “flipping of the table” of Rumpelstiltskin. I think I read it pretty optimistically, and partly it's because of the conversation with her grandfather where he says, “You know marrying a king is not really the worst thing. Think about it.” And she says specifically that conversation led to him, quote, “making it her choice.” I mean, there is forced labor involved. But she's already proved, though, that she can spin it to her advantage. She made money off of every one of those turn-silver-into-gold situations. So she's absolutely able to handle it and handle it very well. Novik goes, “No marriage at the end. My character's superpower is her money lending, a Jewish character's superpower is her ability to money lend,” instead of that being a negative thing. He is supposed to be monstrous, right, Rumpelstiltskin? So to me, I read it like a good old subversion, and I love a good old subversion. The novel's ending, I didn't feel like, lacked subversive elements, but it was more tempered. And I guess I still am on the fence a little bit about how I feel about that. But one thing I loved—and I did bring this up—is the idea of consent running through the entire novel. So Wanda saying “no.” Even the Saryk king says “no” when the fire demon tries to get his name, and Stepon hears that. Everyone connects by this refusal of oppression in really specific moments. But there's also really important moments of consent, and that's between Miryem and her bondswomen and the bondsman in the Saryk kingdom. There's a lot of situations that I feel that way. But at the very end, the fact that the Saryk king won't even allow her to thank him because he does not want to put her under any bonds that aren't her choice. And so this really delicate, nuanced attention to consent, I think, is what makes the novel still satisfying to me, even though I love the unexpected fractured fairy tale [in the short story]. But I still did feel satisfaction from the novel.

Erika Gotfredson: So I actually focused on something completely different but equally subtly satisfying, I think.

Vanessa Iacocca: Oh, we'll see if equally [satisfying].

Erika Gotfredson: I was trying to make sense of, what does this marriage mean at the end of the novel? There's obviously tension between Miryem and the Saryk king throughout the entire text, and she doesn't want to be there, and she wants to escape to the extent that she literally has his murder planned. And then we finally build up to this moment, and it's like three pages left, and she is headed home, and it's [a] homecoming, something that we're all waiting for. And then we have the moment where she gets home, and he asks for her hand, and she accepts, and they get married again. It's the moments leading up to that that I think are super important, and so we have a time after the big battle in the mountain where Miryem stops the fire demon and saves the Saryk kingdom. After that happens there's still a season where she's there waiting for the road to open for her to go back home where we see her adopting the skills that she used in money lending within the Saryk kingdom. And so she's using her ability to keep good records as a way of going around and checking on people and planting things in the Saryk kingdom as a way of rebuilding after this big battle that happens. And so I read this marriage as a way of Miryem realizing where her talents and her abilities are most welcomed and suited for the environment because I know that she is super strong and capable in the moments that she starts the money-lending process in her village and is knocking on people's doors. But we get the idea, at least I get the idea, that she's bitter that they're bitter at her because she's doing her job and she's doing what she needs to do, and yet people hate her for it. And so I think she becomes bitter, at least, that this is what she has to do, and nobody appreciates that she's good at it and that she's sustaining her family literally, whereas in the Saryk kingdom she realizes that literally the same skills are sustaining people, that they are respecting her, that they are appreciating her. And so I think once she has the moment of release knowing that her parents are being taken care of, that she can be gone and Wanda and her siblings can still care for her parents in a way that she had originally done, [Miryem] is finding the environment where her skills are very much valued in a way that they wouldn't have been if she had returned to a version of her past life. So I think it isn't as overtly subversive [like when] she doesn't marry the man who is trying to force something on her, but it's still a beautiful way of putting Miryem in a place where she's able to be really good at something and to be really helpful in ways that she maybe even wasn't in the first portion of the story. Does that make sense?

Narim Kim: I think that you mentioned this whole thing happens in three pages? It's really quick, it's really quick, which goes totally against how the novel's been paced so far, especially in the world-making process. It's really slow. So I think this pacing does the important work of making us [go], "Huh? Wait, what just happened?" And then we start to process, "Okay, why does she make this choice?" And the pacing, I think it signals that it's an obvious choice, an easy choice to make for Miryem. And we have to figure it out, why it's the best choice she can make, why it makes sense to her, although it might not make sense to us. So yeah, I think the pacing is the most important formal device that makes its readers think at the end.

Erika Gotfredson: I like that. I like that a lot.

Vanessa Iacocca: I think your reading is totally irrelevant to consent still, Erika, because she chooses to go to the Saryk kingdom. Just a comment. Oh sorry, Erika, you were going to say something.

Erika Gotfredson: No, no, no, you go, you go.

Vanessa Iacocca: I do agree that the pacing is interesting because I think Novik gets to have her cake and eat it too in a way because short story endings are usually in your face, surprising, something big happens, and she does get to do that to us a little bit at the very end of the novel by pacing it that way. I don't know if you'd agree.

Narim Kim: Yeah, that's a good point. Yeah, it reads kind of like a short story towards the end.

Erika Gotfredson: Because so much happens...

Narim Kim: No explanation. We don't get any soliloquy from [Miryem] thinking about "What are my choices? What can I do?"

Erika Gotfredson: So much happens.

Narim Kim: Yeah, so much happens.

Erika Gotfredson: I like your point, Narim, that we as the readers are then left to figure out why it happened and also how we feel about it. So it's almost like the text is encouraging us to confront why or why not we feel comfortable with the marriage at the end, the remarriage, the second marriage—however we want to think about it. It happened so fast that then the tables are turned for us to go, "Okay, what does that mean?" now that we have 500 pages of Miryem's development, her understanding of who she is, and her relationship to the Saryk kingdom. To go full circle back to our first segment, we have all of this development in this changing relationship that she has with the Saryk kingdom over the span of the novel, that then to have such a rapid ending, we have to do the work of going, "Okay, how does that fit into what we know about her and also how she's developed over the span of the text?" I like that a lot.

Narim Kim: I think all three of us did it, right? I think all three of us were like initially, "What?" And then, "Okay, why?"

Erika Gotfredson: So you're saying, Narim, that our interpretations are interrelated, our stories are interrelated?

Narim Kim: My mind is blown.

Erika Gotfredson: I love it. Well, friends, that's a good place for us to conclude our talk today. So I want to say thank you to our listeners for tuning in. I hope you have enjoyed our conversation. I want to say thank you to Narim and Vanessa for joining. It was lovely to have you both and your experience with the text in very different ways. It has been lovely chatting with you both, so thanks for joining us.

Vanessa Iacocca: Thanks for having us!

Narim Kim: Thank you for having us!

Erika Godfredson: Of course! And then one final note: So we have lots of virtual Big Read events that will be coming your way this fall, so check out our Big Read website for other events that we will be doing. In particular, we will have a second podcast that will drop in the month of October on “language as magic” in the tale, so stay tuned for that. And thanks again for tuning in. Bye, everyone!

Vanessa Iacocca: Bye!