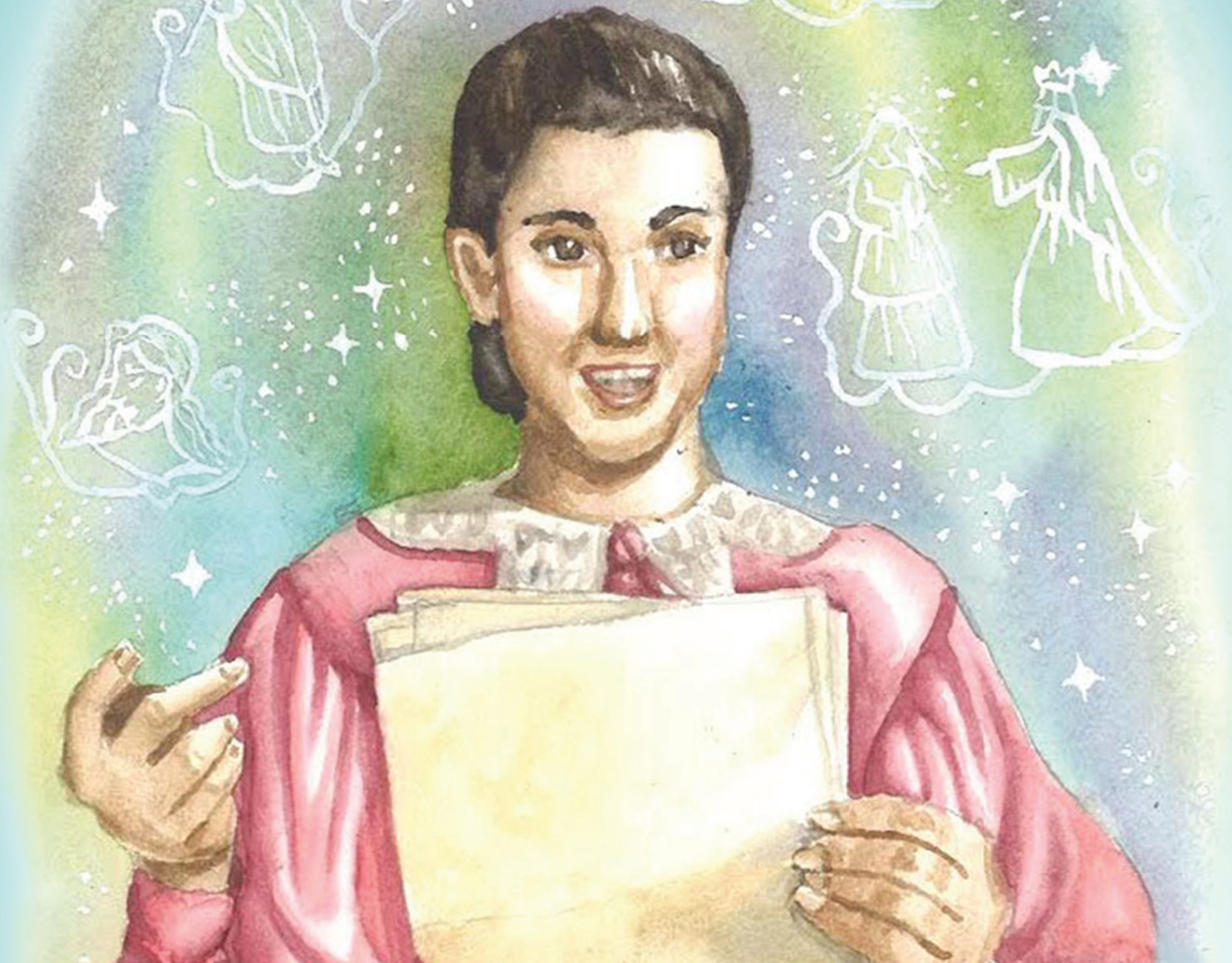


· Written and Illustrated by Naya Tadavarthy ·

# Once Upon an Author

The Story of Gisela von Arnim



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*Zum liebenden Andenken an meinen Opa, der mich immer inspirierte,*

*nach Geschichten zu suchen*

*And for Deb, because I said I would*

University of Notre Dame

2022



*Es war einmal* a little girl named Gisela. Gisela's father died when she was very young, so she lived with her *Mutter* and two older sisters in an old castle called Bärwalde, in a kingdom called Prussia. In these days, everyone from the poorest peasants to the king himself loved fairy tales, and authors like Hans Christian Andersen and the *Gebrüder Grimm* became famous throughout the land.

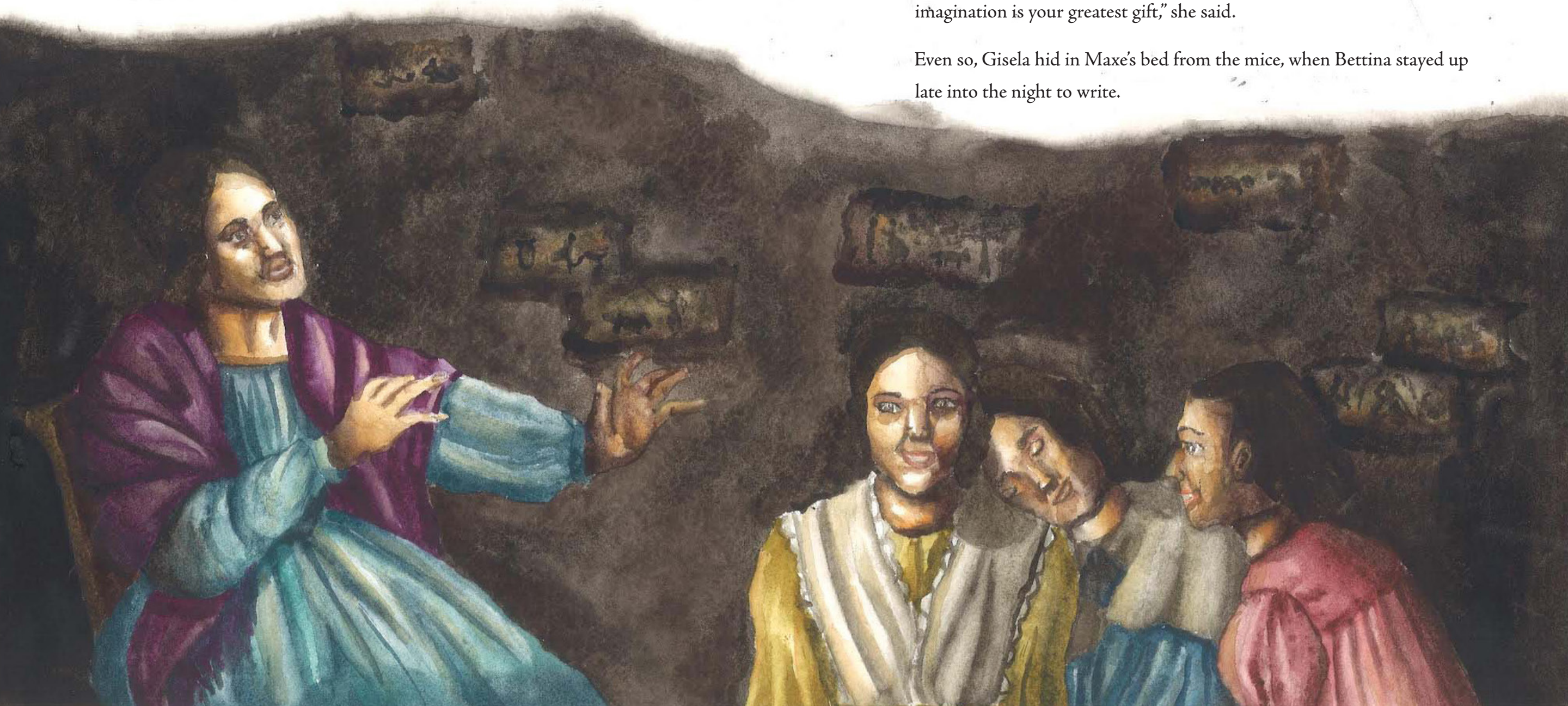
But Gisesla's favorite stories came from her *Mutter*, Bettina. On summer evenings, Bettina told her three daughters about her childhood in a *Klosterschule* and growing up with her grandmother, a famous writer. The candlelight cast shadows on Bärwalde's stone walls, and to little Gisela, it looked like the castle was alive.

"Silly girl," said Maxe, the eldest. "You're imagining things."

"Those are just the mice scurrying around the stones," Armgart, the second sister, added.

But Bettina looked down at her youngest daughter lovingly. "Your imagination is your greatest gift," she said.

Even so, Gisela hid in Maxe's bed from the mice, when Bettina stayed up late into the night to write.





Gisela's *Mutter* was not like other mothers. Most women were not allowed to speak their minds in the kingdom where she lived, out loud or on the page. But Bettina wrote, and wrote, and wrote when the moon soared through the sky, and during the day, she hosted discussion groups called *salons* in her home. Famous thinkers from far and wide would come together to talk about important topics, like politics, or books, or art. All the guests could say what they believed, and Bettina liked when they shared strange, new ideas about the world. Gisela's *Mutter* was the strangest of all. She stood out in a room full of stuffy adults. Sometimes, she even hid under tables or jumped on the sofa like a merry marionette. Gisela did, too. She wanted to be just like her *Mutter*.



More than anything, Gisela dreamed of writing. Armgart tried to teach her younger sister about grammar, spelling, and punctuation. But Gisela didn't care about all of the endless rules. Maxe had even less luck with math, geography, and French. Gisela was smart, but she could hardly sit still. Instead, she ran out of the high stone walls of Bärwalde to the forest, where she built little villages out of stone and moss, as the birds sang from the treetops and the sun shone down from above.



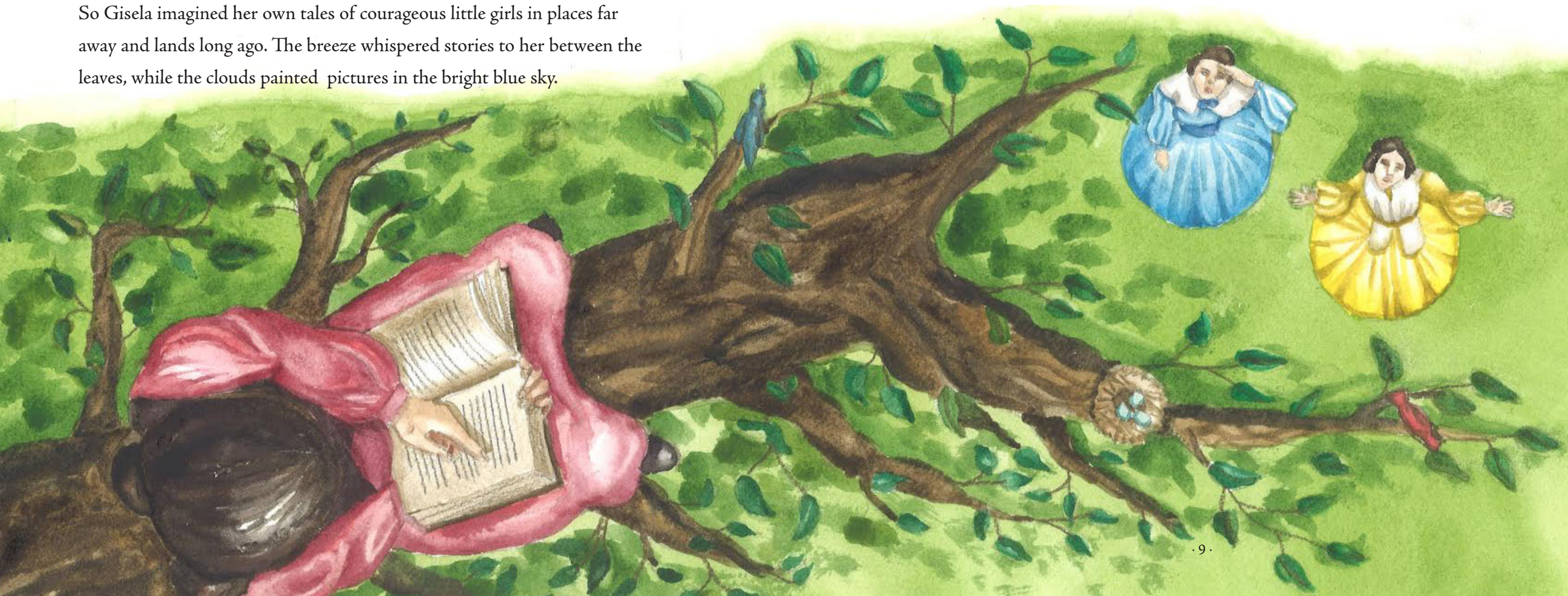
Sometimes, Gisela even perched like a bird on her own branch and read from one of the many books in her *Mutter's* library. Her favorites were stories of queens, kings, and knights, tales of fairies, magic spells, and talking animals written by Bettina's friends, the *Gebrüder Grimm*. Gisela wondered about the princesses in these stories, though. They didn't seem much like her, her mother, or even her sisters. They didn't seem to do or say much of anything at all, except wait for a brave young man to come and save them.

So Gisela imagined her own tales of courageous little girls in places far away and lands long ago. The breeze whispered stories to her between the leaves, while the clouds painted pictures in the bright blue sky.

"Come down from that tree!" called Maxe from below, shaking her finger at her little sister. "You'll fall and break your neck if you keep dreaming up there."

"I'm busy with my stories!" Gisela yelled back, "like *Mutter* or the *Gebrüder Grimm*!"

"Come back to your lessons!" Armgart added, with her hands on her hips. "You'll never be able to write a fairy tale if you can't even spell."





So Gisela learned to write. The characters in her stories kept her company, because Maxe, Armgart, and Bettina were all very busy. The animals at Bärwalde also befriended her. Six grey cats followed her home one day, and she cared for a little white chick who was lonely like her. One day, she came across an injured crane, who had taken quite a fright at the trumpet blast of some soldiers nearby and flown right into a fence. Gisela nursed the crane back to health, and they became best friends. The bird and the girl went on daily walks together. He even followed her into the library to eat the worms out of the old books that lined the tall shelves, as Gisela wrote her own stories.

Gisela grew up with the animals as her playmates, fairy tales as her teachers, and the forest just as much her home as the stone walls of Bärwalde. She also found a friend in Herman, Wilhelm Grimm's young son. Gisela and Herman wrote together, drew together, read together, and even once ran around the tea table on stilts. At this time, many people believed that girls were not as good at reading, writing, or drawing as boys. But Herman never thought that way about Gisela. And Gisela did not think that way about herself, either.

When Gisela was fifteen years old, an invitation from the palace arrived in the post.

“We are going to a ball in the capital city!” cried Armgart

“I wonder if the *Kronprinz* will be there,” mused Maxe. “I’ve heard he’s the proudest and most handsome man in the land!”

“I would give anything to dance with him,” sighed Armgart.

Maxe laughed. “Why would the prince waltz with you, Armgart? He could win the hand of any *Mädchen* he asked!”

Sharply, Bettina looked up from the book she was reading. “That seems like a lot of power for just one young man.”

“But *Mutter*,” said Armgart, “he will someday rule the whole kingdom. So nobody can say no to the *Kronprinz*.”



Gisela didn’t much care for princes or fancy parties. “Can Herman come, too?” she asked.

Since Herman did not live in a castle like the sisters, though, he was not invited. Gisela protested, because she wanted to stay home, too. But Armgart and Maxe said she had no choice. She could not turn down the chance to attend a palace dance. So the three sisters traveled to their house in the city, where they stayed in the winter months, far away from beautiful Bärwalde.

It took all day to prepare for the ball. Maxe and Armgart primped and preened. They adorned themselves with their daintiest dancing slippers and their most gorgeous gowns.

“I’ll help you comb your hair, Gisela,” Maxe offered.

“Ouch, you’re pulling!” Gisela yelled.

“You look beautiful,” Armgart comforted, “so schön.”

“I feel like a tamed animal,” Gisela retorted, pulling at her heavy necklace.

“Like you fixed a long chain around my favorite crane.”



At the ball, there were many women in long dresses, wearing jewels that sparkled and shone. They were escorted around the room by men with their chins held high. Maxe and Armgart disappeared into the crowd, but Gisela stood alone on the side. Suddenly, the musicians started playing a lively tune, and a young man appeared next to her. He bowed deeply. “I have just decided to dance,” he announced, “and it seems I do not have a partner. Would you care to join me, *bitte?*”

He raised his head, and Gisela could not believe her eyes. It was the *Kronprinz!* She remembered what her sisters had said. She could not say no. And so she nodded, reluctantly.



Gisela and the prince began to waltz across the floor. Everyone watched. When he whirled her around, Gisela thought she could see Maxe and Armgart looking from the crowd, full of jealousy.

The *Kronprinz* peered down his proud nose at Gisela. “What talents would a beautiful young lady like you have?” he asked.

“I draw, and I sing, but most of all, I like to write,” Gisela answered, thinking Herman would never look down at her like that.



The prince raised his eyebrows and scoffed, “What would a girl like you have to write about?”

“Fairy tales,” said Gisela, thinking the princes in the books she read were much more charming than the one here. “And what do you have to write about?” she asked angrily.

“I am learning to write proclamations and laws, so I can rule over the people,” the *Kronprinz* responded.

“Well, I’ve never much liked rules and laws, and I think I’m on the side of the people!” Gisela retorted. Shocked with her own boldness, she turned and ran.



Gisela pushed through the well-dressed men and women and rushed down the palace steps. The clock struck midnight, and the heel of her dainty dancing slipper caught in the back of her dress. She tripped and fell. Rip!

When she stood back up, she saw to her horror that her skirt had torn from ankle to hip. She hurried to her carriage, where she sat alone, full of anger and shame.



As she waited for her sisters in the dark, Gisela's mind began to wander.

"That prince certainly didn't rescue me," she considered, "but what if he needed saving instead?"



"Armgarth and Maxe have left me all by myself," she mused, "but what if I had a whole group of girls my age, as sisters and as friends?"



She thought she saw a movement in the corner of the carriage and nearly jumped with fear. What if it was a mouse? But then she decided she felt braver than when she was a little girl, hiding in her sisters' beds. She had just stood up to a prince.

"Who are you, and why are you here?" she called into the darkness.

Silence.

"Silly Gisela, mice can't talk," she told herself. "But what if all of my animal friends could speak?" And with that, she fell asleep and began to dream.



Finally, Maxe and Armgart came back to the carriage, and the three sisters returned home. The two older ones went right to bed, but Gisela did not. Instead, she grabbed a pen and began to write about a little girl in a castle full of talking rats, who finds twelve friends and saves a prince in a faraway land. Just like her *Mutter*, Gisela wrote all through the night, until she could see the sun rising over the treetops and houses of the big city, signaling the break of dawn.

Gisela worked and worked on her fairy tale, and the characters came alive in her mind.

“This is really good,” said Herman, when he read the book Gisela had written. “You should show this to more people.”

But Gisela did not know when or where or how to share her story. Sometimes, she joined Bettina’s salons and listened to all the famous people talk about important topics, but Gisela did not say much herself. In the midst of these strangers, she was quiet and shy.



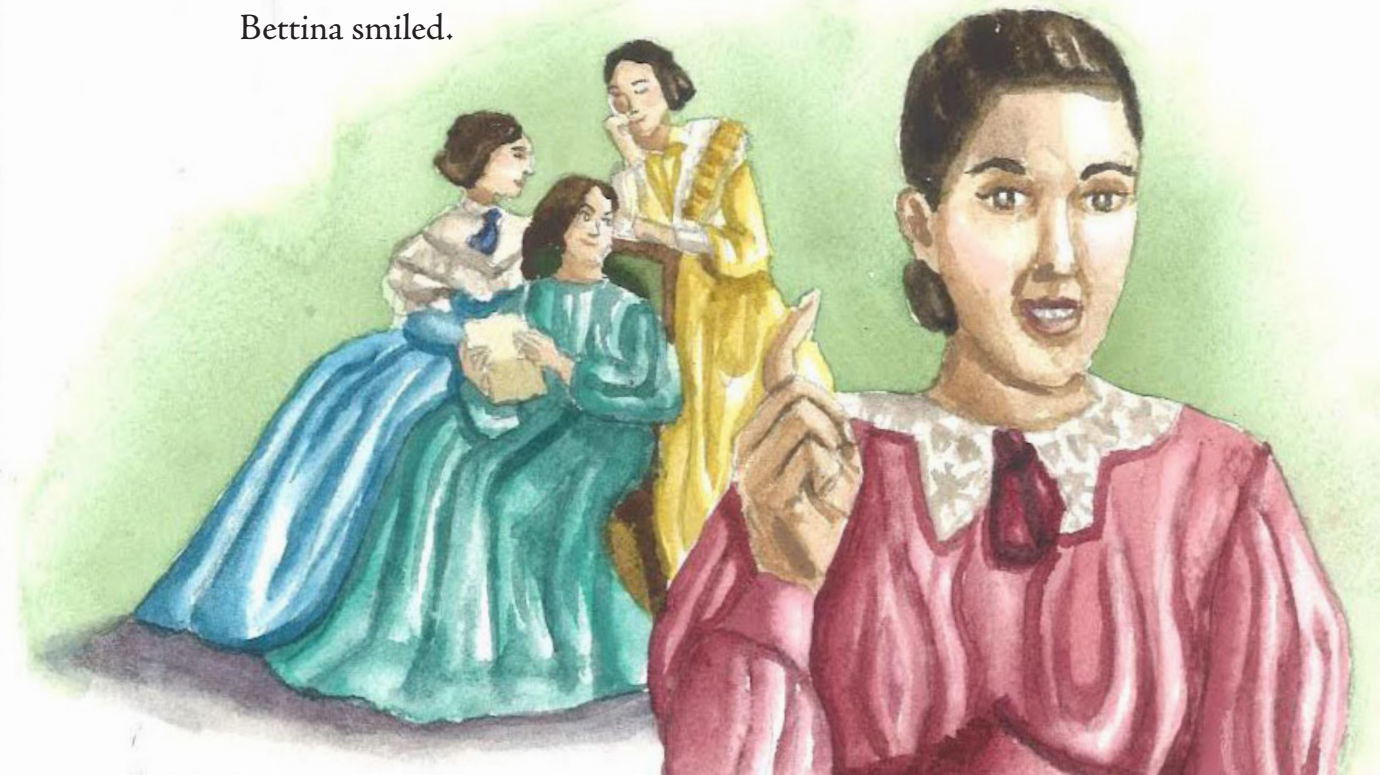
One day, when the rain cascaded down so hard that not even Herman had dared to venture to Gisela’s house, Bettina read a letter aloud to the three sisters. From a friend in a far-off town on the River Rhein, the letter described a group of men who called themselves the *Maikäferbund* and came together to read stories that they wrote. Gisela thought of her own tale. “We could do that here!” she exclaimed.

Gisela expected her sisters to laugh at her. A group of girls and women had never gathered to read and write in their kingdom before. But Maxe said, “That sounds like a *wunderbare* idea! What fun!”

“We can invite all of our friends here in the city!” Armgart added.

Maybe her sisters were interested in more than princes, parties, and spelling lessons after all, Gisela realized.

Bettina smiled.





The three sisters worked together to plan the first meeting of their literary society. Finally, the big day came. The room was filled with women and girls, old and young, who all liked to write. The members of the *Kaffeterkreis*, as they called their new group, wore pointy brown hats with pink veils. As they drank coffee and ate oranges and rolls, Maxe waved a white wand, decorated with pink ribbons and flowers, and called the meeting to order. "I am Präsident Maiblümchen," she proclaimed, "and these are my sisters Lord Armgart and Herr Giseloff."

Maxe explained how each member would receive a nickname and submit a story, a drawing, or a song each week, to share with the whole group. The others could shake rattles if they didn't like it or blow on little trumpets to applaud. Then, they would gather the contributions together in the *Kaffeterzeitung*, their own newspaper.

Soon, all the women began to volunteer their talents.

Old Minne Bardua, nicknamed Minus, said she could record everything that happened at their meetings for the paper.



Her sister Carolina drew the title pages for the *Kaffeterzeitung* and was soon called Altmeister Bardolio. Even their dog, Beauty, became an honorary member.



Otilie von Gräfe, or Sir Odillon, painted portraits of the members.



And Marie, Nina, and Hedwig von Olfers - or Mario, Ninus, and Hektor - wrote and directed plays for the group to perform.



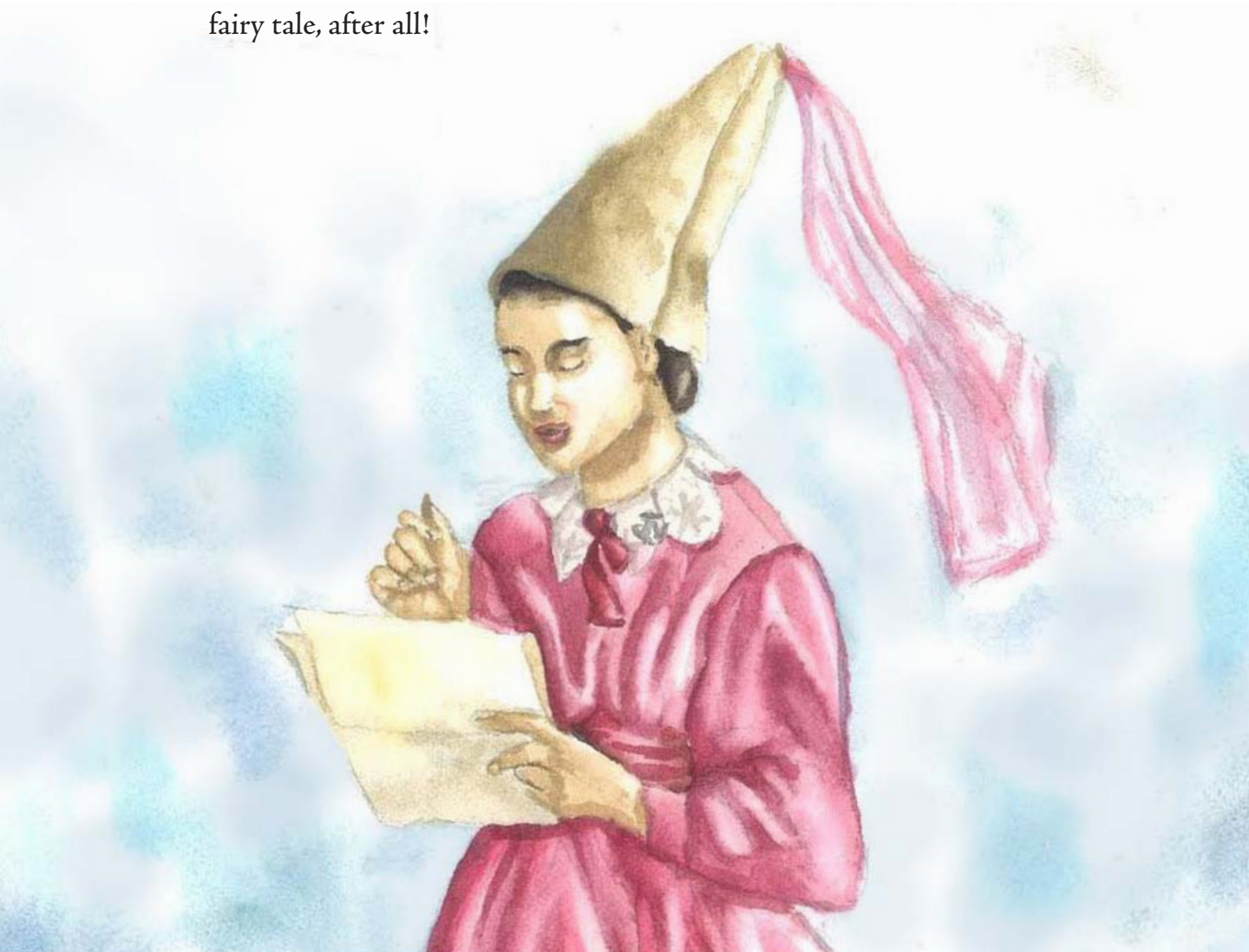
“To start off our first meeting,” said Lord Armgart, “Does anyone have anything she would like to share?”

Everyone looked around the room. No one moved. Gisela swallowed hard, and then she raised her hand. “Herr Giseloff,” Maxe declared, as she pointed at her little sister with her wand.



Gisela looked down at the pages she had written and edited every night, and she began to read: “The Life of High Countess Gritta von Rattenzuhausbeius” She started out softly, expecting to hear a rattle of disapproval after each sentence. But as she described how Gritta cared for the talking rats in her castle, escaped a *Klosterschule* with her friends, sailed to a faraway land, defeated a king, and befriended a prince, she felt her confidence grow. Her voice became louder and louder with each line.

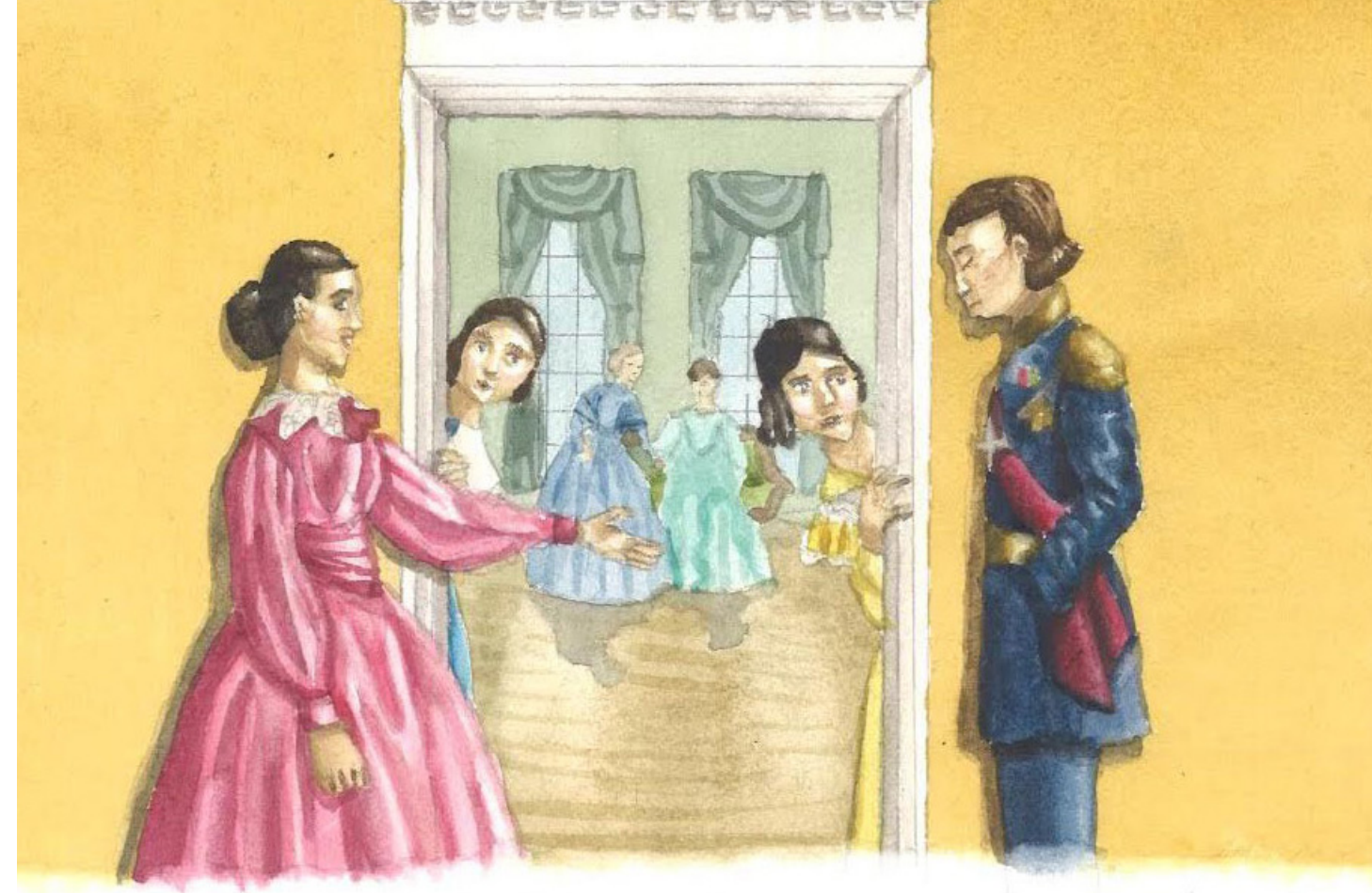
After Gisela finished, trumpet blasts filled the room. They had liked her fairy tale, after all!



The other women showered Gisela with praise, but they also offered suggestions on how she could make her book better. So Gisela wrote some more, and with every word, she improved. She even drew pictures to go along with her story, and Herman, who loved art, helped.

The other members of the *Kaffeterkreis* wrote, drew, and composed, too. Soon, the fame of the group grew. Princesses and duchesses, government ministers and ladies-in-waiting, and even princes began to visit the weekly meetings, to see what these women and girls had to write about, and they were impressed with what they found. Each guest had to pay 4 *Groschen* to attend, and Gisela collected the coins at the door.

Word of the *Kaffterkreis*' success spread so far that even the *Kronprinz* wanted to know what all the fuss was about. So one day, he decided to visit the literary circle himself.



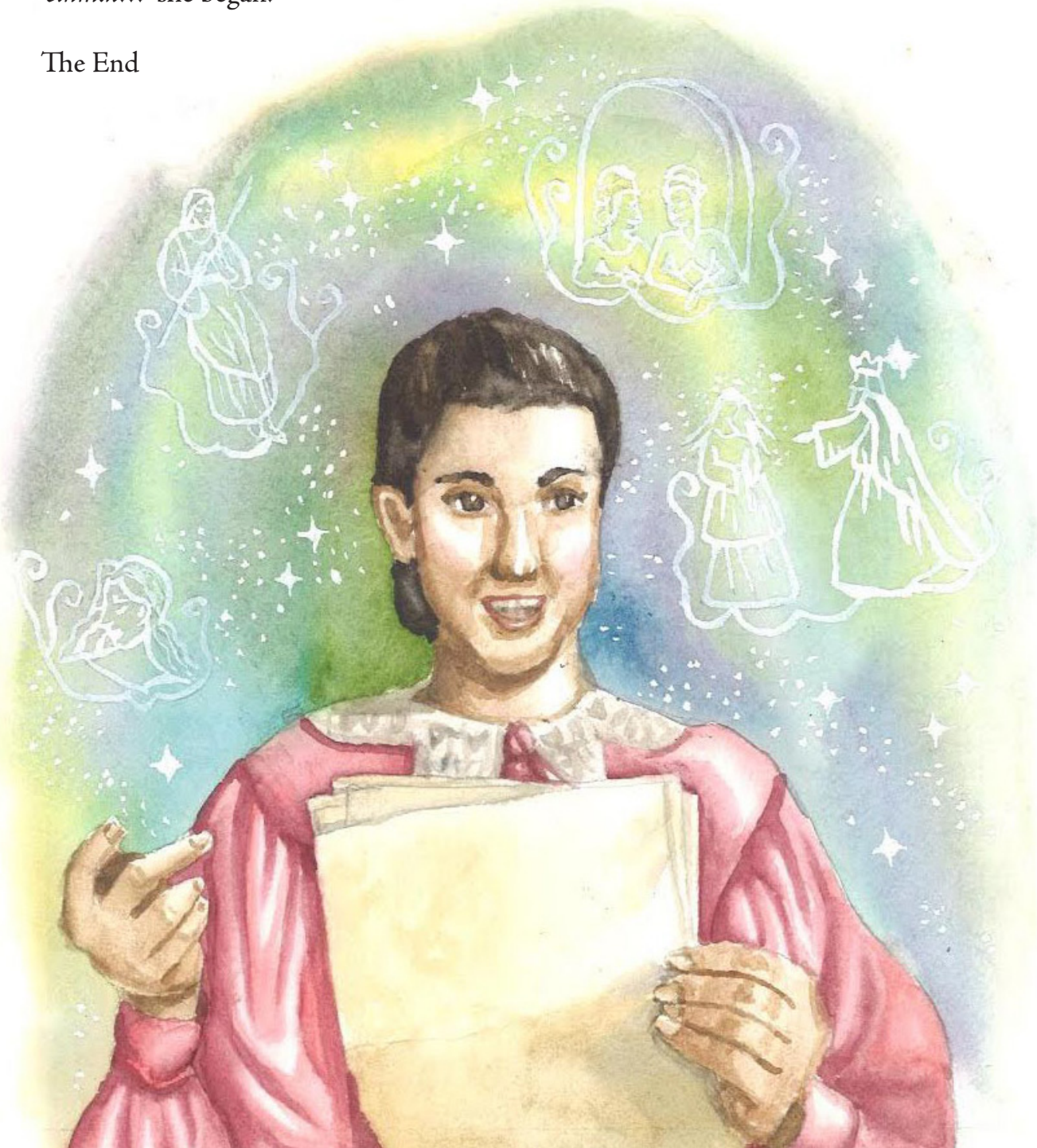
Gisela was surprised to see the prince arrive. “4 *Groschen*, Your Highness” she demanded, reaching out her hand for the money.

“Gisela!” cried Argmart and Maxe, shocked that she would speak to royalty that way.

The *Kronprinz* looked down at his feet. “I’m sorry, but princes never carry any money,” he mumbled. “But I have heard of your story about the little countess who saves a kingdom, and I know just as little about the ways of the world as the prince in that tale. I should not have laughed at you at the ball. Now, perhaps you could teach me how to write something besides proclamations, laws, and rules.”

And Gisela reached out her hand again, this time to lead the prince into the room. Then, she picked up her fairy tale and started to read. “*Es war einmal...*” she began.

The End



## Glossary

BITTE · please

ES WAR EINMAL · once upon a time

GEBRÜDER GRIMM · Brothers Grimm

GROSCHEN · a coin used in Prussia

KAFFETERKREIS · an originally all-female literary circle founded in Berlin in 1843 by the Von Arnim sisters and the Bardua sisters

KAFFETERZEITUNG · the newspaper of the Kaffeterkreis, where members published their works

KLOSTERSCHULE · convent school, a school run by nuns

KRONPRINZ · crown prince

MAIKÄFERBUND · an all-male literary circle, founded in 1840 in Bonn

MUTTER · mother

SALON · a group of writers and artists who meet at the home of someone famous to share their work

SCHÖN · beautiful

WUNDERBAR · wonderful

## Author's Note

Gisela von Arnim (1827-1889) was a real author and illustrator in Germany over 150 years ago. She wrote her most famous fairy tale (and the one described in this story) as a teenager in the 1840s, *Das Leben der Hochgräfin Gritta von Rattenzuhausbeiuns* (The Life of High Countess Gritta von Ratsinourhouse). Though the book was never published, she may have shared parts of the tale with her sisters and friends in the *Kaffeterkreis*, which she helped found around the same time in 1843. The *Kaffeterkreis* ended in 1848, but Gisela continued to read, write, and draw for the rest of her life. She married Herman Grimm in 1859 and authored a number of plays, in addition to her fairy tales. Unfortunately, readers assumed that Gisela's much more famous mother, Bettina, wrote most of the Gritta story until researcher Shawn Jarvis discovered the book's real ending among some old papers in a tower in the 1980s – a true treasure hunt! This is why I wanted to share Gisela's tale with the world. My story is based on real events in Gisela's life, though I have made some small changes and filled in the gaps with my imagination. For more information on fact and fantasy in this story, please visit the link or scan the QR code.



[https://nbtadavarthy93.wixsite.com/  
naya-tadavarthy/gisela-von-arnim](https://nbtadavarthy93.wixsite.com/naya-tadavarthy/gisela-von-arnim)

Once upon a time, a little girl named Gisela wanted to write stories... and she made her dreams come true!



## About the Author

Naya Tadavarthy is a senior at the University of Notre Dame, with majors in studio art and German and a minor in history. She authored and illustrated this book as her thesis for the Glynn Family Honors Program. She grew up in snowy St. Paul, Minnesota, with an orange and white cat named Oliver (see page 10), and when not reading, writing, or drawing, she loves to run, knit, sail, and bake. In the future, she is hoping for a career as a costume designer.