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MODERN STORYTELLING:  
The Power of Myth Revisited

by  
Laura J. Kaighn

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Masters of Arts Degree in the Graduate Division  
of Rowan College  
May 1996

Approved by

Date Approved May 1996

c 1996

Laura J. Kaighn

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## ABSTRACT

Laura J. Kaighn      MODERN STORYTELLING: The Power of Myth Revisited, 1996. Thesis Advisor: Regina Pauly, School and Public Librarianship, Rowan College of New Jersey.

This thesis paper examines the art of storytelling in its modern form. Its purpose is to evaluate the continued use and worth of fairy tale literature within a modern, industrialized society. Through the use of fairy tale literature and interviews of local storytellers it attempts to redefine storytelling as an essential art form and educational medium.

Storytelling not only perpetuates our cultural norms and values, but also our sense of humanity as well. Storytelling fulfills a deep need for us to define ourselves through our stories, the shells of our societal seeds. The art is experiencing a renaissance, and a new mythology is developing which defines human nature upon entering the twenty-first century. Modern storytellers are reshaping the old stories, breathing new life into the familiar myths of our past, and adapting them for the modern audience. The simplicity and intimacy of storytelling has come to reveal a profound power, the power of myth revisited.

# MINI-ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the modern storytelling art form. Its purpose is to evaluate the continued use and worth of fairy tale literature, and to see how storytellers are adapting this literature for the modern audience. The simplicity and intimacy of storytelling has come to reveal a profound power.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### The Psychology of Myth

Without fantasies to give us hope, we do not have the strength to meet the adversities of life (Bettelheim 121).

#### Thesis Statement

Storytelling not only perpetuates our cultural norms and values, but also our sense of humanity as well. It fulfills a deep need for us to define ourselves through our stories, which are the shells of our societal seeds. "Storytelling is probably as old as man's power of speech and as new as the words that come from a teacher's lips today" (Tooze xvi) . Ruth Tooze compares the art of the storyteller and her gifts to children as "garnered from the stuff of life... as light passes through a prism of glass to reveal all the colors it holds" (Tooze xvi) . Why then, do I not remember being exposed to storytelling? What is missing in the lore of the child today? Do the great legends and fairy tales still live for the child? It is this poetry of light- storytelling- which I intend to explore, to determine the gifts of and needs for storytelling, hoping to define my worth as a storyteller in contemporary society.

## Overview of the Art

### History

Though its history is long, and there are many predecessors before me, the art of storytelling does not flourish. In fact, there are many educated people who do not know what it is.

With its beginnings rooted in myth itself, the art of storytelling was considered the property of bards, minstrels, poets, orators, and folktellers of ancient times. Stories described on written tablets and scrolls in ancient Egyptian, Chinese, Sanskrit, and even Sumerian tell of how they were used both for entertainment and for religious ceremony. The Bible, itself, was originally an oral history. "Taoism and Confucianism did not have quite this richness of oral narrative, but they too used stories to spread or reinforce belief" (Pellowski 5).

Whether from ancient hunter-gatherers telling tales of the hunt at the evening meal or from Greek, Roman, or Pre-Christian literature, stories and their tellers were often employed as entertainment. Sometimes they were intended for educational purposes. Pellowski cites the modern philosopher Johan Huizinga who says, "Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing" (qtd. in Pellowski 9). It would seem to most historians, then, that storytelling grew from a need to

communicate and entertain, only later gaining the status of cultural and religious transmitter. It satisfied our need to explain the unexplainable. It gave honor to those supernatural forces we knew to exist. It recorded the actions and qualities of our ancestors so giving them and ourselves everlasting life. But do these needs still exist? Does storytelling still fulfill some cultural requirement? In parts of Africa, India, and Native America where there exists no strict reliance on the written word to transmit culture and history, oral traditions are still firmly rooted. But do these traditions apply to more technologically based societies? Have we lost our roots?

#### Storytelling's Significance

There is a renaissance happening-- a new, modern mythology, modern storytellers who use contemporary issues to continue the tradition of defining our culture therefore defining ourselves. My purpose is to not only seek out these artists, to justify storytelling's worth, but to also discover its contemporary forms.

Storytelling's major obstacle is a world bombarded by visual and auditory stimuli both electronic and digital. Storytelling's main audience, the child, is now more sophisticated than her great grandparents, grandparents, or even her parents before her. Even before birth she is exposed to the sounds of an electronic jibberish, the

explosions of hi-tech Dolby Surround Sound and THX Digital remastering. Literature and information flow from books, newspapers, movies, television broadcasts, CD-Rom towers, the Internet, and virtual reality-capable computers. Is there room in a child's life for the inner imaginings that storytellers provide? Marshall Shelley offers this defense, "Ours has been called a cut-flower society. In an increasingly transient culture, we often find ourselves separated from our roots" (11). Children, he says, "cut free from their past...find themselves adrift, lacking identity" (11). Storyteller and preacher Fred Craddock says, "Anybody who can't remember any further back than his or her own birth is an orphan" (qtd. in Shelley 12).

We need the stories of our past in order for our children to define their present, and to one day mold their future. But they must also hear contemporary tales, those which are "vivid, accurate commentaries on society and [of] the individuals who struggle within it" (Baker 32). Modern mythological figures may be fictional or historical, but they hold one virtue in common. They link us to each other. "Storytelling for both teller and listener is an affair of the heart," wrote Tooze, "as well as of the mind and, beyond both, of the spirit" (Tooze 13). She stressed a story's spiritual significance as fulfilling a unique role.

-stories that stress integrity, sensitivity to that which is good, concern for others, awareness of beauty, a sense of humor. These are the values that help the child grow from an I-centered human being to an other-

centered human being (70).

Storytelling must survive. "In a deeper sense," Shelley writes, "most of us- consciously or not- see our lives as being part of a larger story" (Shelley 8). We face the obstacles and trials of daily living believing that tomorrow will be better, that ultimately there will be a happy ending. Stories feed our minds and emotions. They link us to life and to our past. They help adults and children communicate, help children develop skills, build character, and aspire to greatness. Is there in existence, a modern mythology, a continued need for the transmission of myth? I believe the answer to be a resounding YES, now more than ever, as a bonding for humanity amidst an ever fragmented and specialized society.

According to educator Jerome Bruner, we as parents and teachers seek "to equip the child with deeper, more gripping, and subtler ways of knowing the world and himself" (Bruner 117-118). Sutherland and Arbuthnot write, "Children's literature ...reflects much of the conflict and controversy in our society regarding moral standards and lifestyles" (Sutherland and Arbuthnot 8). Nina Bawden admits to us,

I do know that the books I read when I was young helped me towards some sort of understanding. They helped me to place myself, helped me solve the riddle of why I was here in this particular place, in this particular body (Bawden 25-26).

Arbuthnot and Sutherland add,

It is through depth and perception in characterization that stories become memorable. And it is through such well-drawn individuals that children gain new insight into their own personal problems and into their ever widening relationships with other people (Sutherland and Arbuthnot 41).

Surprisingly, storytelling fulfills these requisites; it logically brings experiences, books, and children together. To reinforce the argument, Sam Keen and Anne Valley-Fox observe,

Usually we learn best when we are enjoying ourselves most: songs, jokes, and stories told just for the fun of it worm their way into our imagination and nibble at the core of our most serious beliefs (Keen).

In like vein, the storyteller, Robin Moore says, children through storytelling

are learning to navigate in the waterways of the inner world, through the channels and passageways, and past the islands of dreams and memories, and into the sea of imagination where all true stories are born (Moore).

According to Baker, it also "encourages the art of listening. ...If the stories [children] hear are worth listening to, they are eager to learn the key that unlocks the symbols" (Baker 21). These aspects of the storytelling craft combine, then, to create a synergism for the listener--a whole much greater than its parts of listening, imagination, and recall. Storytelling is a web linking our lives to others, allowing us to see and feel another's adventures, to experience the world through the characters and their ideal aspects, to be a part of that utopia, to strive for it ourselves.

### Methodology

Through the use of examples of historical and current folk and fairy tale literature and personal insights into story choice, adaption, and technique I hope to justify the storyteller's craft. In discovering the advantages of this art form, I hope to also determine what methods work best with the contemporary child (or adult).

Through interviews with other storytellers, I hope to formulate a current view of the art. It is hoped that they will find agreement in the continued efforts of the storyteller to transmit culture through stories, and through the power of myth revisited reclaim our vanishing humanity.

### Definitions

For the clarity of the remaining work please consult these following definitions of terms. They have been compiled from a variety of sources, primarily from Webster's New World Dictionary, Baker's Storytelling: Art and Technique, and Sutherland and Arbuthnot's Children and Books. Within this work the use of 'fairy tale' and 'folk tale' will many times be considered synonymous. The definition of 'myth' primarily used will be the more general, fifth definition cited from Joseph Campbell's The Power of Myth.

Cumulative Tale- 1. a repetitive tale characterized by minimum plot and maximum rhythm.

Epic- 1. a tale having as the focus of its journey or actions a hero who embodies the ideals of that particular culture. 2. a cycle of tales centered around one hero.

Fable- 1. a brief narrative which takes abstract ideas of behavior and engages a character, usually a human-like animal, to teach a moral lesson. 2. a myth or legend. 3. a falsehood.

Fairy Tale- 1. a story dealing with the magic ways wishes come true. 2. an unbelievable or untrue story. 3. a story dealing with fantastic characters and circumstances. 4. a story dealing with the "little people".

Folklore- 1. stories which record the mores and cultural patterns of society. 2. stories giving expression to the universal emotions. 3. the traditional beliefs, legends, etc. of a people.

Folktale- 1. a story where characters are polarized, portrayed as entirely good, bad, lazy, virtuous, greedy, etc. 2. a story which may portray allegories of humanity, religion, or nature. 3. a fast-paced story which appeals to a child's sense of justice by use of a satisfying and definite conclusion and may make use of rhyme and repetition. 4. a traditional story in which quite ordinary people have extraordinary adventures involving magical objects, transformations, talking animals, etc.

Hero Tale- 1. a tale that recounts the exploits of a human hero who embodies the ideals of a culture.

Legend- 1. narrative about a person, place, or event involving real or pretended belief. 2. a story or body of stories handed down for generations and popularly believed to have an historical basis. 3. a notable person or the stories of his exploits.

Literary Fairy Tale- 1. a story that uses the form of the traditional folktale or fairy tale but that has an identifiable author, e.g. the stories of Jane Yolen.

Myth- 1. a tale which through complex symbolism explains the existences of our reality such as human origins, natural phenomena, the origins of customs, and cosmic phenomena. 2. any fictitious story, person, or thing. 3. a story believed to be true. 4. a common belief. 5. a story dealing with the experiences of life- of truth, meaning, and significance.



Proverb- 1. a succinct commentary on human folly or wisdom.  
2. a short, popular saying expressing an obvious truth.

Realistic Tale- 1. a story that is true to life. It may be either a biography, an historical novel, an adventure tale, or an animal story.

Storyteller- 1. one who tells or writes stories. 2. a sharer of stories and oral history. 3. a folk artist who through the use of words, imaginative detail, and gestures retells an event either real or imagined.

Tall Tale- 1. a humorous story which employs exaggeration told with a seriousness of detail that contrasts with its utter lunacy. 2. exaggerated stories about extraordinary people or animals.

Traditional Tale- 1. a story that has been handed down from one generation to the next, either by writing or by word of mouth with no identifiable author.

## CHAPTER TWO

## Review of the Literature

It is the duty and priveledge of the modern fairy tale to interpret the child's psychology and to present the child's philosophy of life (Kready 243).

Traditional Sources

Upon first inspection, fairy tales, folk tales, and myths tell a story. There are characters, conflicts, plots, and many times happy endings. However, if looked at more closely, these traditional, oral forms of literature portray something more lasting and universal - virtue. If we follow social precepts, then there will be rewards- a beautiful princess, uncomparable wealth, all-encompassing knowledge. If we are of the evil sort, we may end up in another form, roasted in our own oven, banished, or burned at the stake. Yet the old universalities come to us at a price, enveloped within the old paper wrappers of the traditional tales in their traditional forms. Here we will explore ways of gift wrapping the tales for modern times.

Recognizing their Worth

My fascination with the elements of folk tales, fairy tales, and myths consciously occured in adulthood when I started recognizing parallels in theme. Yet as a child I knew what I liked. Stories which touched me, stories which helped me imagine, stories which helped me fly included

"Beauty and the Beast", "The Little Mermaid", "The Pied Piper of Hamelin", "The Little Match Girl", "The Princess and the Pea", "The Snow Queen", "Rapunzel", "The Six Swans", various Aesop's fables, the legends of King Arthur, and the Greek and Roman myths. There were many others which I read but I did not endear as the above- "Cinderella", "Little Red Riding Hood", "Sleeping Beauty". Why?

What makes some stories more cherishable to the listener than others? Is it due to a familiarity toward temperament or personality? If so, these same stories may, in fact, be old-fashioned, sexist, and racially insensitive for the child today. By telling them we may be encouraging these outlooks. Children, exposed to the Disneyized versions of the traditional fairy tales, may come away unsatisfied with their own mundane realities, pining away for adventure, a handsome prince, a beautiful, flawless princess. Reality is harsh. Perfection does not exist. If, instead, we cherish these tales because of an inherent feeling, motif, or theme, regardless of character gender, then the traditional fairy tale still has worth. The secret is to adapt the tales. "Each innovative retelling and rewriting of a well-known tale in the cultural heritage is an independent human act seeking to align itself with the original utopian impulse of the first-told tale" (Zipes Brothers 153).

How, then, is a storyteller to choose from and adapt these out-dated sources? Finding appropriate stories means

identifying what keeps them alive, what keeps them fresh for subsequent generations. What, in fact, is the core of their excellence? Is it myth? "Whatever the tale enunciated hundreds of years ago," says Zipes, "is less important than the myth it has become and its mythic components which are singled out and issued as enjoyable and enchanting commodities" (Zipes Brothers 152).

In defense of the traditional fairy tale and in relation to the modern woman's plight to seek outlets for her true self, Clarissa Estes writes, "The instruction found in story reassures us that the path has not run out, but still leads women deeper and more deeply still into their own knowing" (Estes 6). She argues that the worth is not in the plot of the tale, the characters (mostly male), or even the situations, but in the lessons and inner tellings to the soul. "Stories are medicine. ...They have such power; they do not require that we do, be, act anything- we need only listen" (Estes 15). By transmitting and guiding the feelings and emotions of the story, the storyteller empowers that tale to the listener, the child.

The modern storyteller has an immense sea of fairy tale and mythological possibilities. The keys are to choose well, adapt appropriately, and love the stories for their worth. "Contrary to the ancient myth, wisdom does not burst forth fully developed like Athena out of Zeus' head; it is built up, small step by small step, from the most irrational

beginnings" (Bettelheim 3). Bruno Bettelheim adds that "more can be learned from [fairy tales] about the inner problems of human beings, and of the right solutions to their predicaments in any society, than from any other type of story within a child's comprehension" (Bettelheim 5). He realizes that today's child is more isolated than his childhood ancestors. They "no longer grow up within the security of an extended family, or of a well-integrated community" (11).

By exposing children to the lonely hero, facing dangers on his own, we give children an outlet, a hope for the validity of their own feelings of isolation. "Even more than in past times," says Bettelheim, "the child needs the reassurance offered by the image of the isolated man who nevertheless is capable of achieving meaningful and rewarding relations with the world around him" (11).

In argument educators do not always agree that fairy tales or myths are as applicable to the contemporary child, yet children are not psychologically sophisticated beings. "Realistic explanations are usually incomprehensible to children because they lack the abstract understanding required to make sense of them" (Bettelheim 47). A child's reality is far too polarized and simplistic. For them fairy tales concentrate on cause and effect relationships, the outcomes of behaviors, just the sort of outlets children need. "Fairy tales offer figures onto which the child can

externalize what goes on in his mind, in controllable ways" (Bettelheim 65). In short, they offer displacement behaviors for a child's encounters: scenarios and examples related to his own world.

In telling we must inspire that empathic outlet. In adapting we need to make the tale pertinent to the contemporary audience. As Zipes point out, even the Grimm brothers adapted the stories they collected to fit their Victorian era.

They eliminated erotic and sexual elements that might be offensive to middle-class morality, added numerous Christian expressions and references, emphasized specific role models...according to the dominant patriarchal code of that time, and endowed many of the tales with a 'homey' flavor by the use of diminutive, quaint expressions, and cute descriptions (Zipes Brothers 14).

Today storytellers need to keep in mind the contemporary child and his world, his distractions and his concerns. Above all issues, know your audience.

What is obviously necessary in working with the impact of the tales on children is a method which takes into consideration the aesthetics of reception... the dialectical relationship of a specific audience to the tale at a given moment in history (Zipes Breaking 170).

Adaption can follow these rules set by Laura Kready and other educator/storytellers:

1. preserve the essential story.
2. preserve a clear sequence with a distinct climax.
3. preserve a simplicity of plot and language (Kready

Mechanics of Adaption

Adaptions of traditional fairy and folk tales can be made by simply changing out-of-use terms to more contemporary ones. In the story "The Three Wishes" a black pudding ends up stuck to the protagonist's nose. What is a black pudding? Today's child would know it as a sausage (Cochran Interview).

When telling a story with a traditional male protagonist, a female may be substituted in some cases. Storyteller, Sarah Cochran, tells the story "Jack and the Robbers" as "Jill and the Robbers" with the protagonist being a feisty young woman who earns the help of the forest animals in stealing back the gold.

In many traditional tales there exist accounts of cruelty to animals, prejudices toward a certain class of people, or even strict traditional roles of women as passive homemakers. These many times can be lessened in impact, omitted, or updated with the addition of several details.

Storyteller and clown, Myrna Brandt, tells the story of "Faithful John" where the dead but loyal servant can be brought back to life if the master agrees, not to kill his children (as in the original), but to never see them again. In this version, the twin boys keep their heads; and by agreeing to this terrible fate, the master does not have to give them up and gets his faithful John back, healthy and content. Myrna has also changed the episode dealing with the

ill-fated horse which is meant to carry the master away forever. In the traditional version, faithful John saves his master by shooting, or in one version beheading, the beautiful stallion. Myrna has John chase the stallion away, then he tells his master why, again confirming his stalwart loyalty.

In the traditional Grimm's version of "Florinda and Yoringal", Yoringal dreams of a way to rescue his captured love, Florinda, from the evil witch within the castle. He must change Florinda back from a nightingale and set her free by waving a magic flower over her wicker cage. But there are over seven thousand other young maidens changed to birds. In my own telling I have Florinda, once returned to her former self, free the maidens with the flower, instead of Yoringal. I also portray the witch as a lonely old woman who in her isolation enjoyed the birdsong so much that she was destitute upon their freedom. "The old woman wept for the loss of her lovely birds. She was to be forever alone, again," I finish the story.

#### Modern Tales- Social Issues and Universal Themes

##### The Victorian Era

A literary folk or fairy tale is by definition one which originated in writing as compared to the traditional oral tales. But "literary" has also come to mean "contemporary", though there are many literary tales with



distinctly old-fashioned values which still perpetuate the sexist, stereotypical downfalls of the traditional sources. I speak mainly of the vast literature written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Authors such as Eleanor Farjeon centered their *delightful* tales around the indecisiveness and fragility of the Victorian woman. These stories are decidedly dated, much more so than the traditional fairy tale, in that women are protected, docile, and relegated to daydreams and domestic frivolities rather than adventure and action.

A small group of Victorian women did attempt to update the fairy tale and reintroduce the feminine themes left out by their male predecessors. In Forbidden Journeys, Anne Thackeray Ritchie retells "Sleeping Beauty" and "Beauty and the Beast" with an independent woman's view, and Jean Ingelow tells of "Mopsa the Fairy". Also in the book is Maria Louisa Moleworth's wonderful story of "The Brown Bull of Norrowa". It is the tale of a princess who must save her kingdom by leaving her palace with the great brown bull (who we later find out is an enchanted prince). She must agree to live alone, and stay with him, and to never harm the bull's skin which he must wear for but three hours each evening. When she inadvertently orders it burned, the princess loses her prince. She now must pass through three trials to reach the castle where he resides if she is to regain him. With courage, persistence, and a little magical help, she does.

In E. Nesbit's "Fortunatus Rex & Co." Miss Fitzroy Robinson must rescue the six missing princesses by disguising herself as an old woman who orders six trespassing princes to kiss the apples they've stolen. By these deceptions Miss Robinson thwarts the evil magician and fulfills her promise of finding the princesses proper mates.

Though still from a confining age, these women authors used their writing freedom and intellect to express a subtle change in the outlook of the female character and her male counterpart. "Once women conformed outwardly, an age still free of psychoanalytic suspicion exempted their emotions from close inspection" (Auerbach 1). Other late Victorian and Edwardian women authors for children include Kate Greenway, Beatrix Potter, Christina Rossetti, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and Lucy Clifford. These authors, however, "found themselves prevented from overtly acknowledging the importance for their own creative efforts of the fantasy lore bequeathed to them by their anonymous foremothers" (Auerbach 12). Fortunately today's women authors are allowed the freedom to express themselves and discover new truths for the female character.

#### The New Age of the Fairy Tale

Zipes writes, "Once upon a time keeps shining, and its rays seep through the mythic constellations to tell the tale again on its own terms, on our new terms that embody that

which has yet to come" (Zipes Brothers 156). This is the new age of the fairy tale where adventure and virtue have no particular gender.

These are fairy and folk tales with strong female characters, many of which are adaptations of traditional ones. They include Maurice Saxby's and Robert Ingpen's The Great Deeds of Heroic Women, Toni McCarty's The Skull in the Snow and Other Folktales, Alison Lurie's Clever Gretchen and Other Forgotten Folktales, Ethel Johnston Phelps' Tatterhood and Other tales, Eric Kimmel's The Four Galant Sisters, and Robert San Souci's Cut from the Same Cloth: American Women of Myth, Legend, and Tall Tales. Among others Robin McKinley has also written a contemporary version of "Beauty and the Beast" simply entitled Beauty.

Of these new sources Zipes cautions us with this opinion, "Newly written fairy tales, especially those that are innovative and radical, are unusual, exceptional, strange, and artificial because they do not conform to the patterns set by the classical fairy tale" (Zipes Brothers 148). I do not agree with their artificialness. The traditionals have been with us more because they portray the social norms of a male-oriented society. Modern society needs new tales, tales of an enlightened age, tales that follow a contemporary pattern that still engages and helps us pretend- to strive for that utopia beyond this existence. Thus we have original fairy tales written by such authors as

Jane Yolen, Diane Wolkstein, Eric Kimmel, and many other storytellers who seek to create new stories for today's child, and the child within each of us. As a writer, and one who wishes to tell my own stories, I was inspired by a dream to write "When the Mountains Wept", a tale about the stranding of Great Mother Turtle and the People who help her back to her sea. This is a story of suffering, of grief, fear, and hope. A deed of kindness leads to a promise kept and ultimately an understanding between species.

In regard to these innovative fairy tales and new authors Zipes expresses,

They question the illusion of happiness and universality in the classical tales and make us realize how far we have yet to go to bring the anticipatory illuminations of concrete utopia to fulfillment. They do not deceive with their symbols and metaphors but illuminate (Zipes Brothers 156).

In summary, Zipes wants the fairy tales updated, but rewritten with the essence of the tale intact, with new dimensions of character and theme, with twists of plot and flips of circumstance. I see the new fairy tales as fulfilling just that. The tales are written using a child's eye with a sense of what is right and wrong for the world, with a smidge of wonder and a dash of magic. The new fairy tales are reflections of new yet universal desires. There are still princesses in us women, but we want equal chance to save our prince. We want to have the adventures, to take the risks, to see the world, to grow, to be more than what we were in the beginning of the tale. Humanity evolves in

this way . As Bettelheim states,

The strange, most ancient, most distant, and at the same time most familiar locations which a fairy tale speaks about suggest a voyage into the interior of our mind, into the realms of unawareness and the unconscious (Bettelheim 63).

## CHAPTER THREE

## Storytelling Traditions Then &amp; Now

If America doesn't have what Aristotle and Mr. Campbell call an ethos, if instead there is a gap, we need to make sure that our children are given an early awareness of the timeless, placeless archetypes of myth (Cooper 314).

The Storytellers

Literature, like language, is a changing, evolving entity. Words come into favor. Others, out of disuse, become almost extinct, save for their preservation within older editions of The Oxford Dictionary and in fairy tales.

While there may be many versions of a story we, as storytellers, must make that story our own. It is a matter of finding the one which conveys for the teller the truest meaning of the emotions and feelings of the story. Baker quotes the Victorian writer, Elizabeth Nesbit, in saying storytelling "gives the teller the chance to emphasize significance rather than incident" (qtd. in Baker 17). With the appreciation of word sounds and cadences, says Nesbit, "we approach the great, the significant, the infinite, through some mind more perceptive, more articulate than our own" (Baker 17).

Folktales, says Baker, "come from the folk. ...They are as old as the human race. ...Life then was told in a tale, not explained in a philosophy" (Baker 31). The traditions of

storytelling are as old as spoken language, yet that language and the circumstances within which it exists change with time. Thus evolves the society which owns that language.

The following are interviews of local storytellers and their answers to the following questions dealing with how they handle this change:

1. As a child, what types of stories did you like to hear/read?
2. Name three of your favorites. What about them did you like?
3. When telling stories, today, what criteria do you use to choose them?
4. What types of stories don't you tell? Why?
5. From contemporary sources, what do you choose?
6. Joseph Campbell speaks of myth as our exploration for the experiences of life. What does myth mean to you?
7. Compare new/modern folk and fairy tales to traditional pieces.

Sarah Cochran Interview 1/30/96

Sarah, a librarian and storyteller, read constantly as a child. Her father worked odd construction jobs during the Depression, so Sarah has been in 37 states and lived in 12 of them. "The first place we would go to when we moved to a new place was the library." Her favorite books: Heidi, Felix Sautler's Bambi, Bible stories, and Robert Louis Stevenson's works. After reading Heidi as an adult, however, some of the magic had been lost. Having enjoyed the animals and alpine setting as a child, she now saw the inequity of its politics. "It was not acceptable to me. [Heidi] ends up

sacrificing her life for the daughter. It was not a healthy thing." Sarah realizes that "the stories we read are models" for our children.

When Sarah chooses models for her audience she must really like the story. "I like delicate humor. I like yuk-yuk humor too". She's drawn to Irish tales, mostly, she says, because of her heritage. Interestingly, caves and clothing are two more components that she's drawn toward. After reading 50 to 100 stories, she may find one that she would like to tell. "Rarely am I looking for a lesson." She more often looks to entertain. A story's "got to fit my time frame, my audience. It must [also] not be too terrifying."

Stories that she has chosen to tell are many times contemporary adaptations of traditional tales. Included in her repertoire are her adaptations of "Jill and the Robbers", "Little Rap Riding Hood" which she learned from another storyteller, "Three Little Pigs Rap" which she wrote, and Margaret Read MacDonald's Peace Tales.

Stories that Sarah strays from include those with unsubstantiated cruelty. "I'm not interested in gore," she says. "There's some kind of delicacy thing that is so individualized."

From contemporary sources, Sarah chooses stories where the "princess is out looking for a decent prince. [Where] she's the aggressor." Her examples are "The Princess and the Ogre", "The Magic Pencil", and a story she's written about



Bigfoot. To help her with her programs, Sarah keeps a notebook which includes information about the storytelling settings, stories, audience makeup, and other elements which did and did not work.

To Sarah, myth's definition is very personal. "We are all, each of us, living out a myth," she says. "We're going out and we're coming back. We are each living our own myth." Fairy tales, then, are ways of myth expression and realization.

Myrna Brandt Interview 1/30/96.

Originally a theater participant and professional clown, Myrna Brandt later took up the hat of storyteller when she was expanding her entertainment business.

"My mother read to me until I was quite old, 12 or 13 years old," she tells me. Myrna started to read adult literature when she was around ten. Her favorites: Great Expectations, Nancy Drew, the Oz series books, and books by Louisa May Alcott. She also read Grimm's and Anderson's works. "My grandmother told stories of her life." Born in 1881, "she was very detailed about how clothing was made and how people lived." When remembering those details Myrna compares them with Great Expectations and Little Women. "I had to use my mind to see all of those [details in the books]. ...It was like my grandmother's stories, all the daily descriptions of everything." In fact these inspired

Myrna at one time to write her grandmother's life story.

The criteria Myrna uses to choose stories to tell to others involves something more than just details, however. "Well, being a paid professional, I have to think of my audience," she says. "Mainly the parents." She considers what the young parents of her audience would like her to tell. As the character Mother Goose she takes into account "how it would affect the children. I don't wish to enhance the horrors."

Also, "because I like to be physical, I like to be able to change voices, I like to be able to move," Myrna doesn't choose stories with a lot of the descriptive content she loved to read as a child. She looks for dialog, action, and stories which aren't too long. "As an actress, I act out the stories. They're (the audience) waiting to find out what you'll do next, what you'll say next."

She also doesn't tell gory stories. "I've taken some of the stories that had gore in them and modified them," she says. Stories in which she has culled the violence include "Little Red Riding Hood", "Goldilocks and the Three Bears", "Faithful John", and Stevenson's "Kidnapped". Myrna adds, "I like to see the morals in the stories. A storyteller is more able to get over a point, to some sort of conclusion, than a parent is." Goldilocks disobeys and ends up learning a lesson and being made to keep two promises- to "never again go into the woods alone without Mommy or Daddy. And you must

never, ever, ever, ever go into anybody's house without Mommy or Daddy's permission." Myrna realizes and has been thanked by parents who know, "They'll listen to Mother Goose faster than they'll listen [to adults]."

Myrna is an entertainer. "I've come to make them happy." But she's also conscious of gender equality. In "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" Mommy or Daddy bear make breakfast. "This morning it's Momma bear's turn." When the oatmeal (some children insist it be porridge) is too hot, they decide to go for a jog in the woods. "So they put on their running shoes and their little sweat pants, and off they go for their morning jog." This is a normal activity in the child's world, she affirms. Goldilocks, herself, is also updated. Myrna makes her a feisty, spunky, not wimpy child.

In her version of "Little Red Riding Hood" Myrna updates the child's wardrobe to a cape her grandmother made. She also amends the basket contents to include jams and jars of fruit juice. She argues that children wouldn't know what a sweetmeat was.

"The wolf doesn't eat the grandmother," Myrna says. "He chases her and she hides in a closet." Goldilocks and the hunter come along and chase the wolf, so he hides. "Oh, please don't hurt me," cries the wolf. "I was hungry. And besides, I needed a friend. It's so lonely here in the woods." Myrna defends her adaption. "I would never have the animal injured. He has to learn a lesson too."

In teaching parables and morals, Myrna affirms, we carry on verbal history. We teach children ways to think and act. She would never encourage the brutalities within the fairy tales. "I hope we've evolved farther than that," she says. "Besides," she reminds me, "children have a difficult time differentiating reality from fantasy."

Myth to Myrna deals with the stories and their meanings, "how we can be better people." When asked why she doesn't use contemporary sources she shared with me her confrontation with an advertising executive. She had asked him why it was that children could watch a movie or show over and over again, even memorizing lines. "He said, 'Children love familiarity'. It's easy and safe to take the old stories," she concluded. That's why they're still around and still so popular for telling.

Barbara Baumgartner Interview 2/8/96

With over twenty-five years experience as a librarian Barbara said her first exposure to storytelling was during a workshop she took at Drexel University. The instructor, an authority on storytelling, advocated "that you could not change a word of the printed text." That didn't make sense to Barbara. "You have to change the language to make the story exciting and surprising to the kids today as it was to whoever heard the story originally," she argues. Using the example of the black pudding earlier noted and the male

superiority in many tales, Barbara has come to realize that these stories could happen to anybody. Though her audience can empathize with a male character, Barbara is always looking for chances to adapt a story for a female protagonist. Her version of "Stone Soup", called "Ladle Soup" is based on her own "Norwegian grandmother leaving Norway and needing to stay overnight with somebody." Her grandmother teaches her relatives how to make ladle soup and earns a bed for the night, just a jump along her journey to reaching the New World.

Barbara has also researched older tales to their source when making adaptations. From hearing the story "The Stingy Baker" she realized it had European origins even though it was listed as coming from Peru. During her investigations Barbara found the truth. Indeed it had come from Spain originally, and she wished to adapt it further by adding a female protagonist to make it "Maria and the Stingy Baker". Maria is a local girl who does the laundry for folks and from time to time barter for her wages. In this way Barbara gets inside the characters, creates details, which culminates in a much richer story. "Wouldn't it be wonderful," she says with a smile, "if a totally original story popped into my head?" That, she realizes, is her next area of growth.

As a child her mother read her many picture books like Make Way for Ducklings and Mike Mulligan and the Steam

Shovel, and many classics. When in second grade her grandfather sent her a copy of Grimm's Fairy Tales which she still has. From her grandmother she received On the Banks of Plum Lake by Laura Ingalls Wilder. She loved the dramatic and vivid descriptions, with the Ingalls family "making do on potatoes every day. ...I could vicariously live these amazing adventures. I felt her family was warmer and more affectionate than mine," she says. Of the other stories she encountered when young Barbara admits, "I think I probably liked the rhythm of the language. The pattern of the stories was interesting," she says mentioning the trials and tribulations of the characters, the trilogy of events, and the happy endings. These still intrigue her today. "I'm still reading Grimm," Barbara admits with a smile.

"A lot of different criteria go into the choice of a story," she says of herself. "The occasion, the age of the audience, its tie into a theme, something in the curriculum." Aspects that get her attention include hearing somebody else tell it, a unique language, and the ability for children to join in on a refrain. She reads constantly, maybe 100 stories before finding something she likes. "What's the underlying message of the story?" Is there an "underdog able to overcome great obstacles and difficulties?"

Barbara doesn't tell stories with a lot of violence. For example she tells of her encounters with "The Magic

Drum". After hearing two people tell it, yet still not liking the printed version, Barbara realized a section of the story troubled her, where the older, more stupid brother encases his three younger brothers inside the drum for protection from an enraged lion. In the storytellers' defense she agrees, "The focus had shifted [in the telling] in some way that the emphasis was less on violence and more on how to get out of a difficult situation." That emphasis was now "what kind of talents this main character had that would enable him to get out of this difficult situation." And yet the brothers inside the drum still bothered her enough not to tell the story herself. She adds, "Something in the story becomes a model for us to think about our own behavior or what our talents or gifts are." This alone gives it merit to those who do tell it.

Barbara shies away from Hans Christian Anderson as well. "His stories are pretty complex" and don't match her audience. Philadelphia's urban children need much simpler plot lines, she admits.

In defense of storytellers and their adaptations she mentions copyrights. "To pass a story on is part of the folk tale process... In the oral progression in time the story always changes as it passes from one person to another. And this printed version is the recording of one particular occasion or maybe two or three combined into one." Her praises go out to Diane Wolkstein and Eric Kimmel, who wrote

Bear Head and Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins. "I'm always watching the folk tales that are coming out and noticing who's writing what." Barbara likes strong, simple plots. "They're easier for the listener to hear and understand," she says. Her search is enjoyably on-going.

Emily Cummins Interview 2/9/96

Emily, having enjoyed a lifetime of stories from her family, has been a librarian in Philadelphia and holds the prestigious appointment of storyteller-in-residence for the Gloucester County Library System.

Emily enjoyed fairy tales as a child. "Anything dealing with animals," she says. "Sympathetic tales" whereby "answers were found to problems through the interactions with the animals- a talking wolf or bird gives advice." She likes stories with the assumptions of "evil punished and virtue rewarded". Through her childhood, Emily told stories to her siblings. Her brother liked stories where "the people were incredibly poor and triumphant against great adversity" while her sister enjoyed "stories about people who were loaded with everything to begin with."

Emily's own sense of justice and rightness prevail in her story choices. She is drawn toward stories where people are vindicated. "Justice is a very powerful element in all the stories I have," she says. "Most children and adults want justice in stories, probably because there's so much



injustice in the world." It's a very popular concept, says Emily. "They've reaped their sin. They saw the error of their ways too late, and, thus, they had to pay."

She also likes stories where "you can take the basic skeleton and then add the flesh on for whatever audience you have." For example she talks of Jose Arugo's The Crocodile and Her Baby. Appropriate for various age groups, she can "adapt it up or down, very simple or [with] a lot of extra byplay" for older children. She, like Barbara, is drawn toward the trilogy of events, for instance The True Story of the Three Little Pigs, The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig by Eugene Trivizas, and all the variants of "Cinderella". Other favorites include the Celtic tales like "Tamlin" and the Norse myths such as Stolen Thunder. In this last example Emily offers, "I have always loved the sounds of words, the meanings of words, how they've evolved." From the Norse we get "to steal somebody's thunder". It is a direct reference to the god Thor.

In choosing stories Emily sticks to these criteria: "I have to like them. They have to hold my interest." After reading a story once she can decide whether she wants to tell it or not. "Is it too convoluted to learn?" She doesn't memorize and says, "If I have to explain things before I can tell it, I won't use it." Traditional folk tales stand the test of time, says Emily. She can even adapt them for adults "by adding a few little spins of the plot that really

weren't in there but make them a little more interesting... earthy." She still tells Chase's Grandfather Tales even after 30 years. In the future she may add more Spanish, African, and Chinese tales to her repertoire. "I like something that reflects a people or a country or a time of history," she admits, "where you can get a lot more across than just the words. You've captured a sense of what it was and who they were."

Though there are several factors against a story being included in Emily's repertoire, she also looks to see "if the characters are basically unsympathetic. Old folktales can be very prejudicial toward a specific group," she warns. If one group is getting hammered by another "then you're using propaganda rather than telling a story." She also won't tell a story if it's not relevant. "They have to be teaching something, telling something, informing something, or being entertaining."

Her repertoire includes such untraditional and unique sources as The Old Woman and the Jar of Unums, The Crocodile and Her Baby, Tacky the Penguin, Three Cheers for Tacky, Hooray for Mother's Day, Octopus, reverse fairy tales such as Cinder Edna, and the old folktale The Mitten retold by Alvin Trousseau. These more modern tales are atypical, very useable, reflect our time, and interest the parents because they haven't encountered them before, Emily attests.

Myth, says Emily is "close to a religious thing, but

it's not religion. It's close to a sociopsychological thing. It's sort of the place where me, and a truth, and a story, and a feeling all come together at the same time." It's a "bonding with the story and what it means to me," she says. That search for connectedness continues with each literary encounter.

Sandy Lewis Conversation 12/2/95

Though not a formal interview, I was able to enjoy a talk with this unique performer after a "Winter's Tales" program at Appel Farms in Elmer, New Jersey. Sandy holds a degree in Folklore from the University of Pennsylvania and mainly stays with original folktales. By using musical instruments (guitar, tin whistle, jaw harp, percussion, and bones), juggling, and limberjacks Sandy allows for audience participation in his stories. For the program, stories included the Lenape tale Rainbow Crow, "Raven, the Creator", and "Raven the Know-it-All" both from the Northwest Coast tribes. Other programs center around themes and interests, including Jack tales, Native American tales, animal stories, Halloween and campfire stories, African-American, Mexican, and Irish folklore, and workshops for children and teachers alike. He also incorporates environmental stories into his programs. He doesn't really use much from the new literature, he says, unless he comes across an appealing version of an old folktale like the story a Lenape chief

told him, later published as Rainbow Crow.

### Conclusion

What I have learned from these storytellers is that the fairy tales will continue to be told, continue to evolve, continue to have worth. Through recorded time we have been able to trace their history, much like the genealogy of a family. Since we continue to want better for our children, the stories change...slightly. But there are other ways in which storytelling, itself, has evolved.

Violence and cruelty, in storytelling, are curtailed, probably as a counter balance to the volume to which a child is already exposed from the media. Characters are transformed from male to female or from unsympathetic to more realistic examples of the complexities of humanity. The environments and story elements are updated to show a more familiar setting. Stories are chosen for their worth to the storyteller, as a vehicle for enrichment as well as entertainment. Subsequently, the storyteller's craft has gone from a stagnant ritual to an active one. Gone are the days when a child's attention could be held by words alone. Storytelling has now encompassed theater and mime.

The mythos of the past is being rewritten by storytellers who, with an ear and eye for truth, are retelling common themes with as much power as the Grimms and Andersen. The key to the success of any story is the

instillment of empathy, both for the characters, the situations, and the human truths involved.

With this in mind, what do I have to contribute as a storyteller? The stories I adopt are all a part of me, chosen because of a similarity in the rhythms and feelings of my own spirit.

Unlike Barbara, I like and have told Hans Christian Andersen's works. "The Little Mermaid" and "The Little Matchgirl" are tragic figures with such nobility, portraying such sacrifice, that they will always endure over the selfish sods of other tales. Their destinies are not dependant upon magic helpers and fleeting beauty, but upon self-action and the consequences of those actions.

Porquoi tales fulfill a sense of logic and order for me. I enjoy the reflection of enlightened faces when I tell them. I am satisfied to see the audience's realization and understanding of another's point of view.

Native American tales strike a spiritual chord in me. A respect for all life and one's elders and the wisdom in all things to teach us of a kinder way of living, touch my sense of cosmic order and fairness.

Many of Grimms' fairy tales touch the idealist in me, the romantic. Here too is nobility of character as in "Florinda and Yoringal" and "The Six Swans". Here we find the adventurer, the truest love, devotion, trust, perserverence, and sacrifice. The struggles to overcome our

own frailties and to become more than what we were, to save someone or something and at the same time ourselves, appeals to my inner sense of righteousness and order.

Aesop's fables, apart from being easy to tell, can be made humorous for the very young through pantomime and voice changes. As they were intended so long ago, their lessons for humanity appeal to me, disguised in furry and feathered packages. In my choosing, however, I many times disregard those with violence or adapt them by toning down the brutality just as Sarah and Myrna have done.

When choosing from these sources, the stories must make sense to me. Their plots must be logical with a twist or surprise of event or character earlier hinted upon. Their outcomes must be the result of human will and effort, not the wave of a fairy wand. The ever popular helper, be it witch, lonely gnome, or fox, must only assist with the decision, not the solution. And, above all, love and happy endings must not exist for only a chosen few whose beauty is uncompered. Love at first sight, for me, can happen in only a chosen few instances. If it were a common occurrence children might think this the reality. Beauty does not equate virtue. Cosmetic companies already flourish upon this myth. In the stories I choose, it must be some inner beauty, some portion of soul, which makes the protagonist prevail.

Through adaptions we can add this richness to our characters, be they a princess or lowly carpenter. Only with

these personal touches will the stories continue to live for the teller and her audience. The tales will continue to vibrate to the rhythms of the lifeforces of the storytellers yet to come.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## In Defense of the Storyteller and the Tale

To attain to the full its consoling propensities, its symbolic meanings, and most of all, its interpersonal meanings, a fairy tale should be told rather than read (Bettelheim 150).

We have touched upon the surface of fairy tale adaption and the role of the modern storyteller. We have hinted upon the significance of fairy tales to the modern child's psychological development. As Barbara Baumgartner sums up within her doctoral dissertation, "Clearly the folktale storytelling event is an occasion when the listener, building his/her own culture and life context, can extract personal relevance from a tale" (Baumgartner "Folktale" 44). As time continues to change society, so too do the tales change. As Baumgartner found in doing her storytelling research, "The story eventually evolved, after many tellings in which the response of audience members often reshaped some aspect of the tale" (Baumgartner "Folktale" 45).

In simplistic terms, Baumgartner ties stories to the mythos which is within each of us. "Some of the intrigue with story comes, I believe, because we are always trying to make meaning of the sometimes random events in our lives. We are constantly revising our own story" (Baumgartner "Folktale" 51). Bettelheim agrees with this philosophy saying, "The unique details derived from his own particular



life, with which a hearer's mind depicts a story he is told or read, make the story much more of a personal experience" (Bettelheim 60). Each detail helps the listener to see the story within his head, to make it his own possession, and to cherish it as a personal gift from the teller. In contrast to sticking to the printed text Bettelheim defends the storyteller's active participation in the adaption and recreation of the tale:

Slavishly sticking to the way a fairy story is printed robs it of much of its value. The telling of the story to a child, to be most effective, has to be an interpersonal event, shaped by those who participate in it (Bettelheim 151).

Poetically Bettelheim uses the analogy of told stories as sowed seeds. Some will germinate within the child immediately. Others will take some maturing on the child's part before elements and images of the tale:

will grow into beautiful flowers and sturdy trees- that is, give validity to important feelings, promote insights, nourish hopes, reduce anxieties- and in doing so enrich the child's life at the moment and forever after (Bettelheim 154).

Thus the power of storytelling is not only in the storyteller's performance and the intimacy expressed within the event, but the responsibility of that retelling for the enrichment of the child. Storytelling is not purely an entertaining act; its effects run much deeper. Its history and pertinence span generations. It is history. Clarissa Pinkola Estes sums it with eloquence:

Telling or hearing stories draws its power from a towering column of humanity joined one to the other

across time and space, elaborately dressed in the rags and robes or nakedness of their time, and filled to the bursting with life still being lived (Estes 19).

As storytellers we have a tradition of keeping alive the stories of our past, but we also have a responsibility to the children of our present and their unique needs. Zipes continues in this vein with more serious conviction.

A concrete humanitarian engagement on behalf of children means utilizing the existing literature of all kinds while also creating new, more emancipatory forms so that the fallacies and merits of the literature become apparent as well as the fallacies and merits of society (Zipes Breaking 177).

There are an infinite number of stories, both old and new, for us to discover, evaluate, find compatible to our own needs (or not), adapt, and tell. Some may simply be entertaining. Others may change the perceptions and characters of children forever. In our search for those stories we, as storytellers, are also transformed. We learn to see patterns of humanity, both virtuous and not. We discover universal truths from nations far removed from our own. We become familiar with the unfamiliar, come to respect the worth in others' beliefs and cultures. In a way we become a walking microcosm, transmitting humanity itself through our words and bodies. The storyteller is a precious vessel of life, both ancient and newborn. Storyteller Marshall Shelley relates a story by her friend, preacher and storyteller Fred Craddock who told her,

Some people think storytelling has about as much chance of changing the world as you have of cracking a concrete wall by throwing egg shells at it. Now you can

believe that if you want to, but I've seen those egg shells hit concrete walls. Strangely enough, it was the walls that shattered (Shelley 18).

The power of myth and the human truths it portrays is a culmination of history, culture, and the gifts of personality and communication. Without the storyteller, we lack these qualities. She is the conduit for society, a gauge of its values, a vessel holding all of society's precious gems-- its stories.

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