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Evaluating Stories for Diverse Audiences

Legends take us back to the origins of the tribal people, to their hopes, struggles and defeats. There are many cultures which have stories that are not readily available in print. The information is not found in libraries, but exists within the hearts and minds of individuals called Storytellers.

Legends are a celebration of the human spirit, part of our American tradition, and the history of our country. To this very day they are being told, altered, and retold. In this book, the author attempts to present an interesting version of chanted literature. The legends are told in his voice, echoing the voices of his ancestors. The author does not attempt to present the only account or version of the legend, nor does he wish to offend similar tribal Storytellers. If the reader enjoys these myths, the author in retelling them has achieved his purpose.

It is important to understand the roles and power of the Storyteller. These oral historians are given the responsibility of remembering and reciting their Native American Culture. It is through their ability that we understand their true heritage. (Cuevas 2)

I would like to share an example of evaluating stories for diverse audiences with a diverse group. At the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Library and Information Science, I teach a class called "Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults." This past spring, I had a very diverse group of students registered in the course. The group included two African-American females in their late 20s, one African-American female in her early 40s, one Caucasian female in her mid-40s, several Caucasian females in their mid-30s, one African-American male in his mid-30s, and one Caucasian male in his early 30s. I started the semester with the basic lecture about what to look for when evaluating materials—plot, theme, style, etc. By the second or third class session we were evaluating books. I had the idea of evaluating that very old story, Helen Bannerman's *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, which had been reissued in two different

versions in 1996: Julius Lester's *Sam and the Tigers*, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney, and Bannerman's *The Story of Little Babaji*, illustrated by Fred Marcellino. Each student read the new editions and was required to go to the university library and look at two of the older editions, with Bannerman's original text, in the historical collection.

I have a rule in my classes when we discuss and evaluate materials: we mention the good qualities of the item first and the negative last. This is to ensure that the students do not get drawn into a purely negative discussion and never get around to the positive attributes of a work.

I opened the discussion of these three books by asking for reactions and thoughts from class members. One of the twentysomething African-American females said she had never seen *The Story of Little Black Sambo* and she was glad to be able to look at it, but she "didn't know what all the fuss was about." She also thought the illustrations—which have caused a great deal of controversy—were funny. The discussion took off from there! The fortysomething African-American woman explained the hurt and hatred those illustrations caused during the racial turmoil of the 1960s. The fortysomething Caucasian woman said she had received an original copy of *The Story of Little Black Sambo* as a child and had hated the illustrations but loved the story. The discussion moved to *Sam and the Tigers*, which includes a source note from Lester about *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. Some of the students loved *Sam and the Tigers*, and others hated it. One of the stated reasons for disliking the book was the fact that all the characters were named Sam. Everyone loved the Bannerman book (illustrated by Marcellino), *The Story of Little Babaji*, except for the African-American male, who suggested that the illustrations stereotyped Asian Indians. And the discussion continued. This was an example of evaluating a story and two variants of that story. Evaluating stories in print is a challenging task and even more challenging with a diverse group.

The issues are similar in storytelling. These students of different races, sexes, and ages had very different reactions to the story variants they studied, reactions that depended on their cultural experiences as well as their individual viewpoints. So, too, will a storytelling audience bring their own cultural perspectives to the story they hear. The creators of these variants were also responding, consciously or unconsciously, to cultural contexts for *The Story of Little Black Sambo*; so, too, must storytellers engage with the cultural contexts of the stories they tell.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH

The most common obstacle to the powerful telling of a story is the teller's lack of knowledge; research into the background of tales can allow the storyteller to enhance and add credibility to already powerful storytelling. The teller is encouraged to use indexes and collections to research variants and origins, to enhance the story development and enrich

the telling. Aarne and Thompson's *The Types of the Folktale*, Eastman's or Ireland's *Index to Fairy Tales*, and Margaret Read MacDonald's *The Storytellers Sourcebook* offer a starting point. Other worthwhile resources available for teller research include motif indexes, examinations of folk culture, dissertations on folklore, discussions of superstition and the supernatural, dictionaries of folk language and expressions, encyclopedias of folklore, collections of stories, riddles, rhymes, and jokes, and the list goes on. Story collections themselves often provide substantial background, since some print variants include a source note to assist in the understanding of a story. Betsy Hearne, in her July 1993 *School Library Journal* article "Cite the Source: Reducing Cultural Chaos in Picture Books, Part One," proposed that producers of picture-book folktales provide source notes that set these stories in their cultural context and that those of us who select these materials for children consider how well the authors and publishers meet this responsibility in our evaluation of such books.

Using the indexes, poring through collections, and finding source notes is time consuming, so why should a teller go through all of this work? Because knowing more about the history and origin of a tale allows the storyteller to immerse him- or herself in the story and understand it better, thereby telling a believable story and increasing his/her level of comfort in the retelling. The research conducted by a storyteller often reveals overlooked or hidden qualities of a story and allows the teller to relate that story with greater detail and knowledge, becoming a clearer vehicle. The more the teller is able to learn about the many elements of a particular story, the truer the voice of the story will be (Livo and Rietz 10). A serious storyteller will eventually need to look beyond the text of the story to learn to tell the story well; an informed storyteller enhances the story and renders a rooted and credible telling. Acknowledging the sources, whether the story is documented in folklore, heard from another person, or read somewhere, sets the story in context and allows listeners to prepare themselves accordingly. As a storyteller becomes familiar with the culture of a story, a sense of confidence, authority, and authenticity begins to emerge.

There are many forces at work in the making of a story. Knowing the requirements, conventions, and etiquettes of the culture generating a tale pulls the storyteller closer to it. The actual creativity of the teller adds to these forces. Without adequate background on the contents of a story, the teller may not be able to convey the story's themes or know what kind of creative latitude, linguistic and otherwise, is appropriate. Oftentimes, for instance, stories make references to artifacts (Pellowski 216). Usually the artifacts are not incidental or utilitarian. They carry special cultural meaning important for understanding the stories. For example, if a story makes use of a mango tree from which the protagonist picks a fruit, meanings indigenous to a specific culture and the hidden implications of the

reference are important. Substituting a more contemporary or local, more recognizable tree may violate the integrity and meaning of the story.

African stories are often characterized by a particular kind of oral tradition. Many of the stories are "pourquoi" or "why" stories," stories which explain animal and human characteristics. The repetitive language and styles that encourage interaction with the storyteller make them excellent choices for sharing but also reflect a particular cultural tradition. Personified animals, often tricksters, are popular subjects for African folktales as well as folktales of other cultures.

Many North American folktales and stories have roots in the cultures of other parts of the world or have been influenced by written literature. Identifying tales that began in a specifically North American oral tradition may be difficult or impossible. Four types of folktales found in North America have been identified by researchers: Native American tales that were handed down over centuries of tribal storytelling; folktales that came from African countries and were changed over time, becoming African-American tales; European tales containing traditional themes, motifs, and characters that were changed to meet the needs of the New World; and boastful tall tales that originated on this continent.

Native American tales are usually considered the only traditional tales truly indigenous to the United States. Some Native American tales have motifs in common, but differ in other ways from region to region and tribe to tribe. Many of these are, like African stories, pourquoi tales, explaining why or how animals obtained specific characteristics. Like people in many other cultures, Native North Americans also have mythology that explain the origins of the universe and natural phenomena. Magical animal trickster figures such as Rabbit, Coyote, or Raven are also popular in Native American culture. In addition, traditional tales of legendary heroes reflect many important values and beliefs of various groups. These legendary heroes have many of the same qualities found in heroic tales from other cultures.

Maintaining a balance between story traditions and invention during the story delivery is the responsibility of the storyteller; it always has been. The teller who becomes a student of a story's folkloric substance can better balance story form and invention, and can support a more powerful delivery. To tell a story well, with power and with honesty, one must know more than just the story, and one must achieve a necessary intimacy with its "life world" (Livo and Rietz 2).

EVALUATION OF STORIES

Before discussing the selection of stories for a diverse audience, it is important to discuss the selection and evaluation process of stories in general. Researchers stress a holistic approach to the evaluation of stories prior to telling, emphasizing the necessity of examining theme,

characterization, setting, and style. These are important elements in the success of a good tale no matter what audience the tale is for. Most important in evaluating and selecting stories for a diverse audience is to use the same critical guidelines that are used in selecting mainstream materials. In evaluating stories, tellers must first ask if the tale is well written or translated. Equally important are the setting and point of view. The setting of the story should be clear, believable, and authentic. The details should be natural and interwoven into the action. Just as in mainstream stories, characters should be believable and have depth. Interactions between the characters should sound natural and unforced. The story should hold the attention of the listeners within a credible sequence of events. Tales should succeed in arousing the interest of the listener and the teller. In essence, the selection process for stories of diverse cultures does not differ greatly from the selection and evaluation process of mainstream stories. We still look for cultural accuracy to insure that issues are represented in ways that reflect the values and beliefs of that culture.

Stories from all cultures portray the struggles, feelings, and aspirations of common people; stories depict the lives of the rich and poor; and stories reflect the moral values, social customs, superstitions, and humor of the times and societies in which they originated. There are stories from every culture that include appreciation for the beauty and mystery of life and belief in the power of the spirit to accomplish its will. Some stories are comedic, others tragic, but all reveal the depth of human values. Anything is possible in stories as long as it is faithful to the truths of the heart.

STORIES AND AUDIENCES

If a teller tells tales from cultures that have a particular connection to a specific audience, listeners will come to the tales with certain expectations and perhaps even a sense of possession, which the teller needs to honor. I grew up in an extended family. When my mother and father were married, my father had five children living with him ranging from an eight-year-old to several teenagers—all his nieces and nephews. It was a time when many Jamaicans went abroad, either to England or the United States, in search of work. Once they got established, they would send for their families. My mother entered into the relationship with two younger sisters and a grandmother, my great-grandmother. Everyone affectionately called my great grandmother “Granny.” Granny was old from the day I was born, bless her soul, and she died at the ripe age of 92 in 1980. Granny was a storyteller. She told Anancy stories. I never knew how she came up with so many Anancy stories. These trickster tales always held our attention. Imagine my surprise when, many years later, my mother and I were at the Milwaukee Public Library’s used book shop and there was a book of Anancy stories; from Africa, no less! I was in high school at

the time. I said to my mother, "I thought those were Granny's stories! Someone stole her stories and published them." And then my mother explained that Granny had heard them from her mother, who was a slave, and those stories were brought from Africa. These stories were both part of the culture of African storytelling and part of my culture as a listener to the point where I was shocked to see those tales outside of my family; the Anancy stories are so much "Granny's stories" to me that I still can't bring myself to tell them.

Yet many tales and their cultural origins will be new and different to some audiences. Traditional folk literature, tales originally handed down through centuries of oral storytelling, offers an opportunity for an introduction to another culture in the form of stories that many listeners will enjoy. New listeners gain a respect for the creativity of the people who originated the stories, develop an understanding of the values of the originators, and share enjoyable experiences that have entertained others in centuries past.

We analyze folklore to make discoveries about the types of stories represented, as well as the cultural patterns, values, and beliefs reflected in tales. The teller and listener may notice how many values and beliefs are common to many cultures: the importance of maintaining friendship, a need for family loyalty, the desirability of genuine hospitality, the use of trickery, gratitude for help rendered, respect for courage, and awe of the supernatural. Storytellers are conservators of the memories of oral cultures. Knowing cultural significance and symbolic contents of artifacts can aid the teller in telling and imparting meaning.

Research and background work help establish standards for selecting and evaluating stories for diverse audiences. The identification of high-quality stories helps to bring together the teller and the listener, in addition to instilling in both a deeper understanding and appreciation for the tale's culture of origin.

By studying a culture, we can discover which aspects of its stories are indeed part of the life of that group, and we can also select other culturally relevant details to add to our retellings (Sierra and Kaminski viii). As we enjoy another culture's stories, we extend our knowledge of and sensitivity to the global community.

Editor's Note: An additional annotated listing of Brown's reference tools is included in the appendix of this volume.

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