Stories for the Ages

by | Judith Snyder

• Keep 'em Reading •

Opening the door to the world of folk-lore, with its archetypal elements and universal themes, allows children to discover the wisdom of the ages. In the past, the stories were told orally. These days, our library shelves hold this wisdom in books, and librarians hold the keys. Directing children to the 398.2 section is the first step to unlocking this world for them. Then, by providing additional activities that require immersion in these stories, children will make life-long connections to the tales that have sustained us for hundreds and hundreds of years. The open-ended structure of this unit allows for modifications that adjust for students' instructional needs. The activities work best when taught collaboratively, but the project can also be successful when the librarian teaches independently. I have tried to keep this exercise simple—a place to begin. Start small, with perhaps one or two teachers initially, and then modify and refine what works. Expand the skills each year, and soon your teachers will be clamoring to participate in collaborative cooperative research.

A Few Golden Keys

Begin by defining common terms for different types of lore to help students analyze and compare the story elements. The terms folklore, folktales, and fairy tales are often used interchangeably, but their meanings are slightly different. Folklore is the umbrella term for all traditional narrative created through the oral tradition. The term encompasses the beliefs of a society that were passed down through many generations, and that give us a glimpse inside a culture. Through the characters and the story message, we see how people are expected to behave, as well as their values, motives, and conflicts. *Folklore includes fairy tales, folktales, legends, myths, fables, tall tales, parables, ballads, proverbs, adages, and nursery rhymes, among others.* See page 5 for a reproducible chart that highlights the characteristics of many of these sub-categories.

Folklore in Curriculum

Folklore can fold itself into many curriculum units. With every activity, students receive more exposure to this genre. If the exposure is stimulating and fun, they will return to these stories over and over.

FOLKLORE AND READING

Living in a multicultural society presents us with a wealth of stories. These jewels of ageless wisdom stimulate thought and emotions to help us better understand who we are.

Keep 'em Reading

Activities

1. Immerse students in folklore. Read the stories aloud, find stories written at different grade levels, and let students read silently. Find recordings and let students read along. Provide anthologies as well as lovely, individual picture book renditions. Read, read, read, read.

2. After exposure to a number of stories, ask students to analyze each story's elements to determine its appropriate folklore category.

3. Making connections to folklore is a deeply personal process, because the content and the characters may reveal very distinct feelings to one child and not to another. Invite students to rank the stories they have read and to explain why the first three stories on their list are meaningful to them.

FOLKLORE AND LITERATURE

Contemporary and classical literature may reference folklore or specific characters, and may even borrow the story line. Popular movies also use fairy folk and blend them into new tales. When students are familiar with folklore, it is easier for them to understand the author's images and the message in both books and movies.

Activities

1. Folktales provided fodder for many of Shakespeare's plays. He, like all good storytellers, changed the story and sculpted it to fit his audience. *As You Like It* is based on "The Devil's Bet"; *King Lear* is based on "Cap-O-Rushes". Read the folktales and a retelling of the play. (See *Shakespeare's Storybook: Folk Tales That Inspired the Bard* by Patrick Ryan.) Ask students to compare and contrast the story elements.

2. A variety of fantasy and science fiction books incorporate folklore characters and events. Check the list of novels at the end of the article as a starting point and find others for students to choose. As students read their book, ask them list the folklore that is referenced by the characters, events, or comparisons.

Students should then read the referenced stories and tell how knowing the folklore story informed their understanding of character motives and/or the book's message.

FOLKLORE AND SPEAKING

Folktales existed in the oral tradition long before the written word. Stories migrated along trade routes, meandered with immigrants, and mingled with conquerors in their new lands. The lore narrated historical events, taught lessons, and explained the unknown. But above all, they entertained.

Stories change with each retelling. The storyteller adds a few creative touches and adjusts the story to the audience. This interpersonal touch deepens the meaning and the experience of the story. With practice, anyone can tell a story. Start small!

Activities

1. Teach students the art of storytelling. See the *LibrarySparks* Web Resources archive page for March, 2009 at www.highsmith.com/LibrarySparks/pages/archive/2009/mar and click on "Storytelling Magic" for in-depth lessons on teaching these skills.

2. Fables, in their brevity, offer an easy way to begin. Pair students and give them one fable to act out and share with the class, or let individual students tell the story aloud.

3. Read several commonly known folktales to the whole class. Write down character names and plots, list them on separate slips of paper, and toss them into two different piles. Put students into groups of four or five. Have each group pull one character slip and one plot slip from the piles. Give the groups time to create a dramatization and share with the class. They can outline or map their story, but should not write down any dialogue.

FOLKLORE AND WRITING

A child familiar with folk stories has a good understanding of story structure; folktales generally have an easily identifiable beginning, middle, climax,
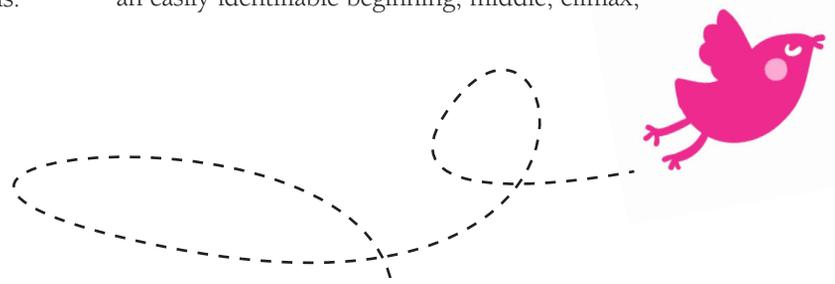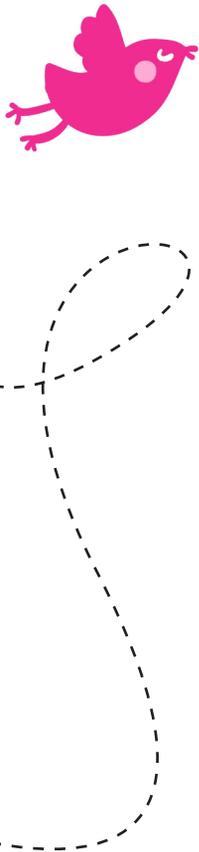
and resolution because the story is simple and well known. Archetypal characters help children identify characteristics of a protagonist and antagonist. Students can then apply the same structure in their own stories.

Activities

1. Students choose a folk story, identify the problem, and list the plot elements into a graphic organizer. To change the story, insert different characters and events that lead the characters to solve the problem.
2. Read a variety of ballads, many of which can be found in poetry anthologies. Ask students to either write the story into prose form, or into a newspaper article format.
3. Students select a folklore character and create a character study in a graphic organizer. Present different topics for student consideration, such as pollution, a recent election, whether the wolf should be arrested for breaking into the pig's house, etc. Students write about one of the topics as if they were that character.

FOLKLORE FOR SOCIAL STUDIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

Folklore adds a different dimension to the study of a culture. By analyzing character motives and the story morals, students gain insight into a society's values.

Activities

1. **Geography.** Variants of folk tales found throughout the world show a connection—a commonality—in our humanness that enriches us as world citizens. Older students can research a story theme using a database to find titles of at least three different stories with similar themes. (See Web Resources below for Folklore and Mythology Electronic Texts, a website with lists of stories.) Younger students can read individual stories retold in picture book format, identify from which culture it originated, and pinpoint the country on a map. (Many times this information is found in the verso.)

2. **History.** Look for news articles of historically important people from the local area, and research their lives. Also read and study the elements of tall tales. Then ask students to create a tall tale about a local hero.
3. **Societies.** Folk tales in most cultures will include a trickster character. Ananse the Spider, Raven, Coyote, Rabbit, and many others entertain the audiences around the world by demonstrating how not to behave. Their escapades reveal the consequences of their bad choices. Read trickster tales from a variety of cultures and ask students to identify and chart the identified behavioral expectations in each society.

FOLKLORE AND SCIENCE

Some folktales attempted to explain how things came to be. Most cultures have stories about how the sun, moon, and stars came to be in the sky, or about a devastating flood. Other stories explain how the geographical landscape formed, or how people came to be on the earth.

Activities

1. During a study of astronomy, read folktales and myths about this topic and have students compare, contrast, and/or connect the ancient account with the current scientific explanation. For example, might folktale variants about the sky falling explain the experiences ancient people had with meteors? Use a database available to you through your school or public library to create a list of these stories and myths for your students to read.
2. In a study of U.S. geography, compare the scientific explanations for the geographic formations to the descriptions expressed in tall tales.

FOLKLORE AND MATH
Activity

1. Ask students to do a survey of favorite folklore stories and chart the responses in a graph. Analyze similarities and differences by age and by gender.

> **"As with all great art, the fairy tale's deepest meaning will be different for each person, and different for the same person at various moments in his life."**
> —Bruno Bettelheim, *Uses of Enchantment*

FOLKLORE FOR EVERYONE

Folktales offer opportunities for both cross-curricular activities and for cross-grade level interactions. Let the suggestions above be a starting point for your own creative integration, and enjoy watching the grand tradition of folklore continue as these rich stories wiggle their way into your students' hearts.

REFERENCES

Fiction Books/Plays

- *The Black Cauldron* by Lloyd Alexander. Dell, 1965.
- *Ella Enchanted* by Gail Levine. Harper Teen, 2004.
- *Fortune's Folly* by Deva Fagan. Holt, 2009.
- *Into the Wild* by Beth Durst. Razorbill, 2007.
- The Lightning Thief series by Rick Riordan, from Hyperion
- *Shakespeare's Storybook: Folk Tales That Inspired the Bard* by Patrick Ryan. Barefoot Books, 2001.
- The Sisters Grimm series by Michael Buckley, from Amulet Books.

Web Sites/Blogs

- **Folklore and Mythology Electronic Texts,** http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/folktexts.html
  This online collection of folklore titles is created by D. L. Ashliman, at the University of Pittsburgh. It is arranged by title and theme, with the main focus on northern and western European stories.

- **Booklights Blog,** http://www.pbs.org/parents/booklights/archives/2010/05/bookworm-basics-once-upon-a-time.html
  Sponsored by PBS, book experts share valuable information about ways to develop a love of reading. This particular article focuses on fairy tales.

- **Carol Hurst's Children's Literature Site,** http://www.carolhurst.com/subjects/fools.html
  Carol Hurst's site contains many worthwhile subjects and activities that compliment popular books. This link leads to an article that focuses on fools and trickster folktales and provides a list of popular titles.

Database
- **NoveList K-8** (Use keywords: folklore and contemporary fiction, or modern authors use of folklore)

Bibliography
- *Cinderella in America: A Book of Folk and Fairy Tales* by William Bernard McCarthy, ed. University Press of Mississippi, 2007.
- "Filming Fairies: Popular Film, Audience Response and Meaning in Contemporary Fairy Lore" by Juliette Wood. Folklore 117.3 (Dec. 2006): p279. *Literature Resource Center.* Critical essay. 24 May 2010.
- *Storytelling Process & Practice* by Norma Levo and Sandra Rietz. Libraries Unlimited, 1986.
- *The Uses of Enchantment* by Bruno Bettelheim. Random House, 1977.

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Judith Snyder is a seasoned teacher/librarian in Colorado, as well as a professional storyteller and freelance writer. Judith is the author of the Jump-start Your Library *series, three books featuring hands-on library lessons from UpstartBooks (2008) and two picture books,* What Do You See? *(2009) and* Stinky Feet *(2010) from Odyssey Books. Visit* www.judithsnyderwrites.com *for additional literacy ideas and articles featuring integration of the arts and creative thinking.*

TYPES OF FOLKLORE

Fairy Tale

- Includes royalty, magic, or fairies
- Contains repeated story phrases or events (This depends on the culture, but many European cultures' stories often use repetitions of three; Native American stories use four; Asian stories use eight.)
- Uses many words ending in –est, because everything is special
- Integrates the elements of good verses evil, with good or hope winning in the end

Folktale

- Mirrors the real world of common people
- Uses characters that may be human or animal that show a desire for justice, beauty, truth, and liberty
- Includes a protagonist who shares with others and will often experience fame, fortune, and love
- Incorporates the natural environment of the culture
- Contains repeated story phrases or events as in fairy tales

Legend

- Based on real people or historical events
- Focuses on the importance of those events within a specific society

Myths

- Presents religious beliefs of ancient cultures
- Shows the actions of gods or godlike beings while explaining their attributes and relationships to each other, to humans, and to nature
- Helped early societies explain what was then inexplicable

Fables

- Teaches a moral lesson in a very short tale
- Gives human characteristics to animals, plants, and inanimate objects

Ballads

- Told or sung in verse by medieval minstrels, these stories traveled throughout the European countryside

Tall Tales

- Characters are bigger than life
- Filled with wild exaggerations, though these stories may be based a real person
- Rich with similes and told as first-hand accounts involving bragging and boasting. Cowboy Pecos Bill, lumberjack Paul Bunyan, sailor Stormalong, and railroad man John Henry are a few of these characters.