

Stories and Storytelling— Long Ago and Today

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Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, there were people, very special people, who could tell stories—long stories and short stories, sad stories and funny stories, stories they could chant and stories they could dance. They were storytellers, bards, and shamans. All around the world, in cities, towns, and tribal villages, these storytellers memorized hundreds, or even thousands, of stories, myths, songs, and poems. Then they could tell just the right story to just the right audience at just the right time. Sometimes they told these stories to teach a lesson about life, sometimes to bring courage to the hearts of the listeners or to bring tears to their eyes, and sometimes just to make everyone laugh. What a great way to spend an evening around the fire—listening to stories!

Storytelling is defined in the *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* as “the oral telling of stories to groups of children in libraries and other institutions.” But it is, and has been, so much more than that throughout history! Telling a story is very different from reading a story.

The storyteller looks out at the audience and makes eye contact, and then the storytelling becomes interactive, which means that the storyteller pays attention to the listeners' responses to the story and then makes changes to the story to make it better for the audience—maybe telling it faster or funnier or with more feeling. However, the reader of a story sees only the printed page, with no interaction. There is great joy and excitement in sharing a carefully chosen story with an audience.

The oldest story known in any language is the epic poem from ancient Sumeria (now Iraq) about Gilgamesh, a king who was two-thirds god and one-third mortal. An epic poem is a very long poem that tells the story of a hero or of a country. The Gilgamesh story overflows with heroes, monsters, deadly enemies, and devoted friends. The story may possibly have roots going back as far as 3,000 BC.

Then, there was the blind Greek poet Homer, believed to have written the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, perhaps around 1,500 BC. The recent movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is loosely based upon Homer's *Odyssey*, which shows that there is still life in the very oldest stories.

And, of course, you have heard of Aesop and his fables. Some people think that Aesop may have been a slave in Greece who lived sometime in the sixth century BC. You know some of the stories. There's the one about the little mouse that helps free the lion that has

been trapped by some hunters. The moral of the story is that even the small and the weak can do powerful things. Or, there's the one about "the boy who cried wolf" when the wolf wasn't really there and scared his parents one time too many with his lies. Then, when the adults stopped believing his wild stories and cries, the real wolf with real teeth ate the boy for dinner! And the moral is what?

The *Mahabharata* is the greatest epic of India and a primary source for Hindu mythology. Written about two thousand years ago, the *Mahabharata* is the longest literary work in the world. When published recently in India, it was five thousand pages long. Imagine being the storyteller who memorized and told all of those stories!

Then, there is *Beowulf*, the oldest surviving epic poem written in English, probably written around the year AD 700. *Beowulf* is regarded as a great masterpiece of Anglo-Saxon literature. The story is full of bloody and heroic battles fought against the forces of evil, with many examples of honor and virtue, strength and bravery, and courage and cowardice. Wouldn't you agree that it is the very same kind of story that is so popular in movies and in video games today?

In more recent history (only about three hundred to one thousand years ago), there have been some stories that are so "tellable" that they are found in the literature of many different cultures. The story of Cinderella is one of these tellable tales. There are more than seven hundred different ways that the Cinderella story is told around the world. Although the character may not be called Cinderella in most of the tales, she is usually featured as a heroine who is treated unfairly by a stepmother and stepsisters, receives magic help from a fairy godmother or another friendly spirit, and ends up marrying the prince.

Now, let's bring this history of stories and storytelling up to today's creative style. One of the stories that I love to tell is also based upon the Cinderella story. It is just a little different to listen to because it is a "spoonerism" tale—one in which the letters of some words are switched around as the story is told. So here is a short version of *my* kind of Cinderella story:

Rindercella (Cinderella) was a geautiful birl (beautiful girl) who lived with her mugly other (ugly mother) and her two sad bisters (bad sisters), who tell her that she can't go to the pransome hince's (handsome prince's) party. But then her gairy modfother (fairy godmother) waves her wagic mand (magic wand) and sends Rindercella to the dancy fare squance (fancy square dance) in a cig boach (big coach) with hix white sorses (six white horses). She meets the pransome hince, and they lall in fove (fall in love). But then, when the clock mikes stridnight (strikes midnight), she runs away and slops her dripper (drops her slipper). The very next day, the pransome hince searches for the geautiful birl who slopped her dripper, and when he finally finds Rindercella, the dripper fits—it is exactly the sight rize (right size). And mo they were sarried (so they were married) and lived appily ever hafter (happily ever after)!

I've come to the end of this brief history of stories and storytelling. I hope I have given you a little understanding of how important storytelling has been around the world, both long ago and today.

At the time of this article's publication, Susan L. Adams worked as a youth services supervisor with the Wake County Public Libraries and served as the conceptual editor for this *THJH* issue.