How do you tell if a folktale in picture-book format is authentic, or true to its cultural background? What picture books have met the challenge of presenting authentic folklore for children? These two questions, which dominated a recent program at the Harold Washington Library in Chicago, are especially pressing in light of our growing national concern about multicultural awareness. And, they generate even broader questions: How can an oral tradition survive in print? How do children's books pass on—and play on—folklore?

To begin answering these questions, this article and its sequel (to appear next month) suggest guidelines for professionals who use picture-book folktales. Only when we look objectively at the quantity and quality of folklore that permeates picture-book literature—and I exclude literature for older children with great reluctance and solely for the sake of a realistic scope—can we look at specific cultural traditions and the various ways they have been translated into picture-book folklore for children.

Of course, as readers—and even as librarians—we cannot be expected to know everything about every folktale retold in picture-book format. But, in this first part of “Reducing Cultural Chaos in Picture Books,” I propose:

- That the producers of picture-book folktales provide source notes that set these stories in their cultural context;
- That those of us who select these materials for children judge them, at least in part, on how well their authors and publishers meet this responsibility.

**STORY AND CONTEXT**

Most of us who have been storytellers in modern times know that it is common courtesy to acknowledge sources, whether we've heard the story from someone else or read it somewhere. More than manners, this practice also sets the story into a framework that is *part* of the story, giving listeners a context for the story world. Oral cultures provided this context naturally: most stories were told in traditional settings, either domestic or ritualistic. If stories were introduced cross-culturally, they came a few at a time and were absorbed over time. Adaptation was a long-term process, and stories were a community heritage well known to listeners. Their expectations of a story were primed by context, and their understanding was shaped by context.

Stories have never just floated through the air, though some Native Americans have expressed a rather existential idea that stories have an independent life. Writer Howard Norman, in his piece called "Crow Duck and Other Wandering Talk," tells a haunting story about finding the bodies of ten black crows in a snowy field. John Rains, a Cree elder with whom he discussed the strange sight, suggested that "some story will come along and find those crows, and use them."

"To the Cree, stories are animated beings. One could tell a biography of a single Cree story (which would be a story in itself) just as one could tell the natural history of an animal. In this respect, one could ask what stories do when they are not being told. Do they live in
villages? Some Cree say they do. Do they tell each other to each other? Some Cree say this is true as well. Certainly stories live out in the world looking for episodes to add to themselves. Therefore, we can understand John Rain's belief that eventually a story would find the torn crows. Later, that story would find a Cree person, inhabit that person awhile, and be told back out into the world again. A symbiotic relationship exists: If people nourish a story properly, it tells them useful things about life.”

Maybe these Cree appeared to Joseph Campbell in a doctoral dream, because Campbell's theory of myth, which has been widely popularized on television, seems to float stories through time and space until they find a home. Those who study folklore by analyzing its basic elements, or structure, often appear to release folklore from contextual contracts. Structuralists assume that stories have a cross-cultural commonality allowing us to derive meaning from them regardless of context; we bring context from our own backgrounds and traditions. I am, in fact, part structuralist and have pursued through too many years a study of the story "Beauty and the Beast," based on the observation that the story retains a skeletal structure no matter what details flesh it out, or what culture provides its heartbeat and keeps it alive. Homo sapiens, as the scientists say, share species characteristics, and stories are a deeply shared human activity.

One of our other characteristics, however, is a capacity for developing and maintaining distinctively different societies, depending on environment, experience, and—probably more than we know—gene pools. These variations, in the good old days, had a defined time and space of their own that has been subjected to a hurricane of cross-ventilation by contemporary transportation and electronic technology.

Today, anthropologists are still interested in a story's context. But, copyright lawyers are not. If a folktale or collection has entered the public domain—and most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century folklore has-anyone who uses it can receive credit as sole author, with no legal responsibility to cite a specific source, especially if there has been adaptation or amalgamation. As children' librarians who evaluate folklore in picture-book format, whose side are we on, the anthropologists' or the copyright lawyers? Do we care what person or culture the story comes from, or do we buy it, tell it, and trust it to find its own new home with young listeners, like the stories that found and inhabited the Cree?

**BACK TO THE BEGINNING**

To delve into this question, and some others with even broader implications, I'd like first to look at our options: the sources for many of our stories, and the way those sources attribute their sources. For a variety of reasons, economic as well as aesthetic, social, and psychological, folktales have been a staple of children's literature since its beginning: from chapbooks, to series by nineteenth-century folklorists such as Andrew Lang, to post World War I and II refugee artists' translating fairy tales into illustrated format, to the market-driven renaissance of folklore and fairy tale picture books in the 1980s and '90s.

Children's literature has become, to many folklorists' horror, one of the primary tradition-bearers of the twentieth century. And, children's librarians, long stereotyped as less than crucial to serious academic and professional concerns, generally determine what will be bought and told in public library and public school forums. We, even more than teachers or parents, pass on the kind of stories that children used to hear told beside home fires and now, if they're lucky, hear told in story hours or read at bedtime. As book selectors, we control by consumption. And we, as anyone attending a library conference can tell these days, have a strong commitment to multicultural diversity, questing for the politically correct approach to various ethnic groups' representation in folklore published for children. Thus our key question: What's authentic to a culture and its traditions?

There's plenty of evidence, during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, that stories go back and forth between oral and printed traditions. The printed and oral traditions are different, but they share some resemblances, including individuals' adaptation of common tales. In the printed tradition, adaptation may include the altering of motifs, tone,
and setting by words or by pictures and by context or the lack of it. What does story context mean in the printed tradition, and how does it lend that yearned-for attribute we call “authenticity” to a folktale printed for children’s popular consumption?

At minimum, folklorists who are collecting a story must note the name of the teller; the time, place, and circumstances of the telling; and the tone of the occasion. Storytellers who are more interested in entertainment than in scholarly study can work their sources and any information relevant to understanding the story into its telling, usually at the beginning. Urban legends often derive their credibility this way (e.g., “My cousin Joanna told me this story, and it really happened to her friend—whose kidney was stolen in New York City,” etc.).

A Source Note Countdown

Among the adaptors of picture-book folklore, there’s a wide variety of source acknowledgement practices, which I shall count down from five to one, or from worst to best.

5. The nonexistent source note. The worst case is easy to describe. The subtitle or jacket copy of a book makes a vague claim—be a “Korean folktale,” for instance—which is faithfully picked up and authoritatively echoed in the Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication (CIP) statement, there to remain forever engraved as fact; The source of this tale is Korea. It’s a little abstract, isn’t it? But, it’s the closest we’ll ever get to context, thanks to sloppy thinking on the subject by persons who may have exerted the most meticulous effort on text, art, production, and distribution.

4. The background-as-source-note. Better than nothing but still close to useless, this note gives some general information on the culture from which a picture-book folktale is drawn. It’s important to know about traditions, but that’s a background note, not a source note. In some ways, it’s worse than no note at all because it’s deceptive. It looks like a source note, so we let it slide by. Some notes (variation 4A) even manage to tell the history of a tale but avoid citing the book or books from which the tale was adapted. Others (variation 4B) declare that the picture-book author heard many stories from his/her grandmother/grandfather, but beg the question of where he/she heard/read this particular story. Implication is a sneaky and highly suspicious maneuver. Source notes, once and for all, tell sources. How can we know what’s been adapted without being able to track down the author/artist’s source?

3. The fine-print source note. Moving up the responsibility chart, this is the little tiny note that acknowledges in little tiny letters, often as a subset to the CIP information but almost invisible to the human eye and certainly to lay adults trying to keep their eyes open during a bedtime read-aloud, the actual specific source. If you look very closely, you might find the name of the book and its author, and perhaps even the publisher, date, and other amenities that make and out-of-print source easier to find. Albeit hard to read, the information is there for those willing to dig it up. And, I’m going to suggest before this is over, folks, that we all start digging.

2. The well-made source note. A respectable note of this variety cites the specific source(s) in a highly visible print block cleverly integrated into the book’s design at beginning or end. Picture-book creators who have this much integrity also may have the good sense to add some description of the way the story might have been told, the way it fits into a culture, the way it reflects narrative commonalties—Coyote’s relationship with other Native American tricksters, for instance.

1. The model source note. The truly exemplary source note cites the specific source(s), adds a description for cultural context, and describes what the author has done to change the tale, with some explanation of why. This delivers all the essential information to harried lay readers and leaves room for scholars to verify its accuracy or make a study of picture-book adaptations of folklore if they’re burning to do so.
Let me go on record as saying that Numbers 4 and 5 are no longer acceptable in the world of children's literature, that Number 3 is getting tiresome, and that those who aspire to Number 2 might as well go all the way up to Number 1 and win the prize-a bona fide link in the great chain of folkloric communication.

Examples of these kinds of source notes (mostly types 1 through 3) are included later and in the captions to the illustrations found through this article.

**Wronging the Story**

Before presenting the evidence, I'd like to pop the question of why any of this matters. Why not just read that "Korean folktale" aloud to our kids, enjoy the story, and feel virtuous about spreading cultural literacy? Isn't it better to keep stories circulating than buried, whether or not they're "authentic," whatever that means? Aren't there only four basic plots in the world, all subject to mere variation of detail? Isn't all art equal and subject to the whims of fortune? Why invent rules to circumscribe creativity?

I'd counter those questions with another: Why not have both creativity and context in publishing picture-book folklore for kids? Can anyone doubt than John Bierhorst's adaptations of Native American stories are richer for the cultural understanding he brings and conveys to readers? That Virginia Hamilton's African-American retellings deepen with the research she does and summarizes for us? That Alvin Schwartz's fans benefit from the stories he told about the stories he told?

In discussing the relationship between informant and collector, anthropologist Barre Toelken suggests a standard that applies to the use of folklore in children's literature: "Accepting responsibility for the delicacy of relationship and trust with tradition-bearers must be the basic ethic for fieldworkers. Just as important, the responsibility is passed on automatically to anyone who controls archival materials and to anyone who uses the materials in scholarship." Omitting sources is not just bad manners. It's "wronging the story," as one outraged graduate student exclaimed.

Of course, children's books are not scholarly books, but if we can't meet ethical standards with children, how can we set them for children? The source note does not have to be academic; it can be simple and user-friendly. Like everything else, there's an art to it. After all, picture-book folklore itself is an innovation. Whoever thought that so much folklore would find a home in picture books? Of the 13 picture-book folktales I reviewed in the June 1993 issue of *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* alone, five lacked source notes.

**History and Background**

At the most basic level, a bit of background can make the difference between understanding the symbolic layering of a story and simply regarding it as the product of an "exotic" culture. Most of us, for instance, know very little about the Taíno people, who met Columbus with friendship only to be demolished by the Spanish. George Crespo's picture book *How the Sea Began* (Clarion, 1993) nourishes our new consciousness about historical perspective and gives teachers and librarians a chance to introduce younger students to those who inhabited the Caribbean islands before Columbus "discovered" them. But, without Crespo's fine note, we'd lose much of the myth's impact.

*How the Sea Began* tells of a young hunter who provides well for his village until a hurricane takes him. His grieving parents find only his bow and arrows, which they hang in a gourd from the ceiling of their hut. When hunger overtakes them, they tip the gourd to retrieve the bow and arrows, and out fall fresh fish in a rush of water. Later, some mischievous children tip the gourd too far and break it open, whereupon water rushes out and forms the sea, with all manner of fish.

Crespo's one-page note not only cites the specific source (*Relación acerca de las antigüedades de los indios* by Fray Ramón Pané) and its story (commissioned 500 years later)
The myth suggests that out of death comes life, that from our children—even those who have been tragically killed, even those who are greedy or mischievous—springs an eternal life force. Without information on the burial custom, we would have been cheated of the implications that make a story enduring enough to grow with a child's experience and understanding.

Sometimes inconsistencies in background information and source citation are striking. In the same season from the same publisher come two picture-book Jack tales. One has an exemplary note relating the author's Appalachian background, his specific printed source, and the changes he's made in the story. The other has no note at all, even though the story seems to come from the same set of popular collections: The Jack Tales (Houghton, 1943) and Grandfather Tales (Houghton, 1948), edited by Richard Chase. If No Note didn't get it from Richard Chase, who did he hear it from? Why not tell us? Richard Chase attributed The Jack Tales up front on the title page to "R.M. Ward and his kindred in the Beech Mountain section of Western North Carolina and by other descendants of Council Harmon (1803-1896)."

Knowledge can only deepen our reading and listening, especially of stories that grow from unfamiliar traditions. Those willing to invest in some background exploration of a tale will bring more to its retelling or illustration and shouldn't hesitate to share what they've learned. Ironically, most of the old printed sources are already in the public domain, so there's no permission or money at stake. Perhaps we've simply succumbed to the cult of the individual writer/artist in wanting to see our own names in print, without the supporting cast of millions who have carried the folktale tradition for centuries.

The Burden of Responsibility

So far, I have placed the burden of context on the adaptor, illustrator, and publisher. But there are other responsible parties here, including the reviewer and the consumer, especially the professional librarian. It's up to us, if we're going to recommend, read aloud, or tell picture-book folktales, to check them out carefully.

Without Eric Kimmel's note on the source and adaptation of Bearhead (Holiday, 1991), I could not have compared it to the earlier Russian version. Making the effort to do that took a lot of extra time as a reviewer, but is also told me a lot about cultural differences and the leap from Russian folktale to U.S. picture book. Heavy adaptation, even the creation of a composite tale from different versions or fragments, is acceptable if we have the information to evaluate it. It's important that we start taking those measurements into consideration. That's not to say that source notes should take precedence over text and art, but in the overall balance of selection, source notes should be one element that counts.

An entertaining male Cinderella variant features the hero threatened by a fat woman who wants to cook him and eat him gives no indication anywhere in the book as to where the story came from, or when. The book jacket calls it an African folktale. The figures, costumes, and settings appear, in a generic kind of way, to be African. All my alarm bells are ringing. The fat woman is not giant, ogre, or witch, but a plain ordinary villager. Are we talking cannibals here? Or did the adaptor just add or exaggerate that bit because he thought it was funny? This consideration might weigh more or less heavily in a decision to purchase, depending on the book's other qualities, but it must with something in the evaluation of picture-book folklore.

Respecting the Tradition
A librarian may not reject a great picture-book folktale with fine illustrations just because it's missing a source note. But, it's time to declare that part of a great picture-book folktale is the source note, that context is important to text. And, when the picture-book folktale is borderline in quality of art and text, the issue of source citation can balance the decision positively or negatively.

"To be human is to be in a story," says Paula Fox in her introduction to *Amzat and His Brothers* (Orchard, 1993), three tales passed on to her by an Italian immigrant living in New York City. In retelling his Bremen Town Musicians variant, "Mezgalten," Fox elaborates with her own inimitable flair: "No sooner had the tiny rooster led his friends into the house than he felt chicken feathers around his feet. 'I don't care for these feathers,' he said. 'They make me wonder where the chickens have gone.'"

Whether this bit of sly dialogue belongs to Mr. Vecchi or Ms. Fox is less important than Fox's acknowledgement of Vecchi's role in passing the stories on and her description of the pre-World War II village setting that provided an earlier home for them. She has become part of a tradition by respecting it. So can we all.

**REFERENCES**


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