

**FOOLING AROUND WITH STORIES:
CHILDREN'S BOOKS, ORAL LORE,
AND THE PLAYFUL IMAGINATION**
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Besides food, shelter, and love, there is nothing more important to children than playing. Fooling around is their job, and though it may appear unproductive to grown-ups, it's the foundation of discovery. As Chet Raymo says in his essay on Dr. Seuss and Dr. Einstein, "Science depends upon the dreaming mind." There's a picture book that celebrates the supremacy of children's play. It's called *How Tom Beat Captain Najork and his Hired Sportsment*. **[SLIDE 1]**

"Tom liked to fool around. . . **[SLIDE 2]** He did low and muddy fooling around and he did high and wobbly fooling around." **[SLIDE 3]** But "It looks very like playing to me," says his Aunt Fidget Wonkham-Strong who wears an iron hat and takes no nonsense from anyone, and so to teach Tom a lesson she sends for Captain Najork and his hired sportsmen: "They play hard games and they play them jolly hard." But even though it's Tom alone against everyone else, he just mucks and fools around and puts them all to shame. And so in the end Captain Najork gets Aunt Fidget Wonkham-Strong and Tom gets the captain's boat and a new aunt, Bundlejoy Cosysweet, and everyone's happy – including the reader (or better still listener), who might not realize the wisdom but is sure to enjoy the games, their outcome, and Russell Hoban's cadenced, light-as-air sportscasting.

A three-year-old I know, named Leo, can't read yet, but he recites his favorite books verbatim while playing. At the moment, he is acting out Leo Lionni's Caldecott Honor book, *Alexander and the Wind-up Mouse*, in its entirety. **[SLIDE 4]** However, he has no toys that resemble the characters in Lionni's book, so instead, he uses his large and small red Clifford dogs, **[SLIDE 5]** along with a small plastic lizard, a plastic purple bead, and a gourd that he substitutes for a broom. You probably don't need to be reminded of the ubiquitous series about Clifford the big red dog. But to remind you of Lionni's story, a mouse named Alexander befriends a mechanical mouse named Willy and--jealous of the love Willy gets from humans--goes on a quest to transform himself into a mechanical mouse just like Willy, with the help of a magical lizard and purple pebble. Ultimately, Alexander instead transforms the mechanical mouse into a real mouse. Here's the original opening:

[REPEAT SLIDE 4]

"Help! Help! A mouse!" There was a scream. Then a crash. Cups, saucers, and spoons were flying in all directions. Alexander ran for his hole as fast as his little legs would carry him. All Alexander wanted was a few crumbs and yet every time they saw him they would scream for help or chase him with a broom.

Now here's Leo's revised opener, as he transforms Lionni's story into his own, substituting "Clifford" for the word "mouse" and a gourd that he has found in the closet for the word "broom":

[REPEAT SLIDE 5]

"Help! Help! A CLIFFORD! There was a scream. Then a crash. Cups, saucers, and spoons were flying in all directions. CLIFFORD ran for his hole as fast as his little legs would carry him. All CLIFFORD wanted was a few crumbs and yet every time they saw him they would scream for help or chase him with a GOURD.

Leo practices the phrase "Then a crash" quite a lot, banging his gourd on the table until he is told to stop. (This may also reflect his having memorized Rosemary Wells' book, *Noisy Nora*, which ends in Nora's reappearance "with a monumental crash!") After dramatizing the entire book of *Alexander and the Wind-up Mouse*, Leo comes to the end, when Willy the wind-up mouse has been magically transformed into a real mouse. The book says:

[REPEAT SLIDE 4]

Something squeaked! Cautiously Alexander moved closer to the hole. "Who are you?" said Alexander, a little frightened. "My name is Willy," said the mouse. "Willy!" cried Alexander. "The lizard . . . the lizard did it!" He hugged Willy and then they ran to the path. And there they danced until dawn.

Leo says:

[REPEAT SLIDE 5]

Something squeaked! Cautiously CLIFFORD moved closer to the hole. "Who are you?" said CLIFFORD, a little frightened. "My name is [pause] ANOTHER CLIFFORD," said the CLIFFORD. "CLIFFORD!" cried CLIFFORD. "The lizard . . . the lizard did it!" He hugged CLIFFORD and then they ran to the path. And there they danced until dawn.

Leo does a lot of hugging and dancing with the two Cliffords at the end.

There is a lot to think about in how Leo has interlaced a "literary award" book and a "popular culture" book, but there are also deeper issues here. This true story I have told you is about a crossroad of fantasies, in which characters from two different picture book stories, several personal toys, some found objects, and a child's own imaginative fantasies interact. Note the hyper-textual sophistication of Leo's picking a story with doubles, in which one character, the wind-up mouse, is a "not-real" character within a world that includes a "real" talking mouse **[REPEAT SLIDE 4]**—and then substituting different animals from a different book. This is pretend on pretend! Leo has appropriated a complex piece of fiction (by another Leo) into his own life and further complexified it. I won't even conjecture about which characters he's identifying with here and what issues he's working out so intensely when he whacks that gourd/broom on the table. What we do know is that he has had a rich fantasy life related to books since he began to talk, and I suspect will continue to do so till he turns 18, when we librarians and teachers watch him magically transform into an adult. Fantasizing, which is a key to creative and innovative thinking, begins at birth and lives forever if we nurture it. What if . . . ?" is the question that leads to discovery in the arts, sciences, social sciences.

I might add that Leo is autistic, and children with this disorder often have difficulty with language, abstract concepts, and imaginative play. Leo's ability to engage with symbolic games of "pretend" bodes well for normal development and may be a result of his having been constantly read to from birth by his parents and babysitter, a strategy described long ago by Dorothy Butler in *Cushla and her Books*, about a severely disabled child responding to a steady diet of children's literature read aloud. Whatever children's range of abilities or capabilities, they thrive on stories.

As do we all. In a recent piece about neuroscience, Annie Murphy Paul writes that "brain scans are revealing what happens in our heads when we read a detailed description, an evocative metaphor or an emotional exchange between characters. Stories, this research is showing, stimulate the brain and even change how we act in life." MRIs have tracked different parts of the brain that respond—with varied intensity—to words involving odor, texture, motion, and interaction. "The brain, it seems, does not make much of a distinction between reading about an experience and encountering it in real life; in each case, the same neurological regions are stimulated." Two other studies found "that individuals who frequently read fiction seem to be better able to understand other people, empathize with them and see the world from their perspective." A 2010 study of preschool children concluded that "the more stories they had read to them, the keener their theory of mind," which is what scientists call the "capacity of the brain to construct a map of other people's intentions." Essay writer Steve Almond puts it more simply: "stories . . . remain the most reliable paths to meaning ever devised by our species."

I believe that all of us have stories that shape our lives. This is a collection of essays that I co-edited about that process, *A Narrative Compass: Stories That Guide Women's Lives*. **[SLIDE 6]** Included in the stories that shaped the lives and work of 20 scholars were folk and fairy tales, family stories, children's classics, poetry, films, and even telenovela (Latin American soap operas). I believe that all of us have such stories that we carry with us from childhood, often unawares, into our middle and elder years.

So let us sense for a moment the beginning of childhood. A baby floats in a dark, warm world of her own. She can't see, but she can sense the beat of a heart. Whatever else intrudes on her senses, that beat is basic, rhythmic, and sure. It organizes her sensibilities into a predictable pattern. Heartbeat is the first storyteller.

The baby also hears, in her underwater world, bumps and thumps from far away and one other sound,

steady, up and down, silent, and steady again. The voice of her mother moves in patterns even as this baby's brain is formed. With the rhythm of those patterns is born the baby's story self: her sense of emphasis, continuity, and—above all—the rise and fall of sounds that lead to expected patterns. Patterns elicit order from disorder; stories, which are patterns of sound and narrative, also elicit order from disorder. Even submerged, the baby is exposed to the very elements of story. After she is born, the child's story self develops with the acquisition of language, interacts with stories that she hears informally, extends into literacy, intertwines with literature, and embraces culture. From lullabies to nursery rhymes to finger games to folktales to fairy tales to family lore, to novels and nonfiction, children absorb patterns of language and narrative from hearing stories.

From hearing stories, they learn to tell stories, progressing from unformed efforts at description to clearly articulated realistic accounts to expressive flights of imagination. Arthur Applebee, in his book *The Child's Concept of Story: Ages Two to Seventeen*, says that children organize stories in increasingly sophisticated arrangements, beginning with a first primitive level called "heaps," or stories containing no obvious means of organization, and progressing through a second level he identifies as "sequences," or stories with a particular idea that associates their elements. The third level is "primitive narrative," in which elements are associated by complementary relations, with the consequences of certain actions becoming important. The fourth level consists of "unfocused chains" organized into chunks that bear little relation to each other; the fifth level involves "focused chains," with one central character maintained throughout; and the last is "narrative," in which events are organized to form a coherent whole. A study by developmental psychologist Peggy Miller at the University of Illinois has shown adults and children narrating or co-narrating from four to thirteen personal stories every hour among families of African American, Anglo-American, and Chinese backgrounds.

It is no accident that storytelling is the oldest form of acculturation. Whether expressed in oral lore, pictograms, dance, song, printed literature, film, television, or computer networks, story is also one of the most universal forms of acculturation, of integrating the old and the new. We tell old stories to new children to help integrate them into society. We tell old stories about new events to enlist the wisdom of those who have gone before us. Even in new stories we find old patterns, because stories symbolize human experience. This balance of the old with the new is something all of us seek, on both an individual and an international level. Every nation, industrialized or third world, has a common need to balance the preservation of unique traditions with the incorporation of global changes. Every ethnic community struggles to maintain self-identity while merging with an increasingly diffuse world community.

Storytelling allows us to strike this balance: while vastly different cultures share common motifs and tale types, each tale carries its own cultural flavor. When we share traditional stories with children, we are not only passing along our own cultural values, but also sharing a universal tradition. As we have moved from oral to printed to electronic modes of communication, the interpersonal sometimes seems lost to the impersonal, but storytelling is an irrepressible activity. The Internet is alive with urban legends, which are often variants of older rural legends making themselves at home in the city. Traditional stories travel well but, paradoxically, they also root easily.

All of us are familiar with a variant of the persecuted heroine, often called Cinderella. All of us identify with the child abandoned in a wilderness; this is one of the most common motifs in folklore precisely because abandonment is the child's—and many an adult's—deepest fear. From Ishmael or Moses, to Aladdin, to Hansel and Gretel, to Babar the Elephant, to E.T., we watch the generations recast this fear and resolve it in story form. Each community shapes the problem according to its own landscape: Ishmael survives a desert; Moses, a river; Aladdin, a cave; Hansel and Gretel, a forest; Babar, a journey to the city; and E.T., an odyssey among modern scientific earthlings. In "The Story of Two Jealous Sisters" from *The Arabian Nights*, all three of the sultan's children are abandoned to a river before they win their rightful place. We all identify with those children, especially with Parizade, who combines courage, virtue, and quick wit to save her brothers and fulfill her fate.

The same baby whom we introduced as being imprinted with the patterns of her mother's voice before the first breath was taken, will move with bated breath through the patterns of "The Story of Two Jealous Sisters" and learn from it the value of courage, virtue, and quick wit. Lessons, we may forget; but stories, never. From stories, we learn the art of survival. They are as important to our minds and hearts as food is to our bodies. Today, some of our children are starving for stories. Their greatest hope for spiritual survival lies in stories that strengthen understanding and offer hope for the small, the vulnerable, and the powerless. Our children must become culturally literate, which in our era involves reading. Today, the heroes and tricksters who once lived in oral tradition have taken up residence in books, especially children's books.

In the U.S., with its multiple ethnic traditions, children's literature has become an heir to many different oral traditions from all over the world. A six-month-old baby may be held in front of a lullabye book such as Hush Little Baby **[slide 7]** and hear a song from the Appalachian mountain tradition, which is rooted in Irish, Scottish, and Welsh cultures.

Hush little baby, don't say a word
Daddy's going to buy you a mockingbird.

If that mockingbird don't sing
Mamma's going to buy you a diamond ring.

If that diamond ring is brass,
Daddy's going to buy you a looking glass.

If that looking glass gets broke,
Mamma's going to buy you a billy goat.

If that billy goat falls over
Daddy's going to buy you a doggie named Rover.

If that doggie named Rover don't bark,
Mamma's going to buy you a horse and cart.

If that horse and cart don't pull
Daddy's going to buy you a cart and bull.

If that cart and bull fall down,
You'll still be the sweetest little baby in town.

Emotionally, the baby is hearing in this story-song reassurance that a parent will always care about and take care of her, no matter what disappointments or disasters occur. Intellectually, she is making a connection between cause and effect: if this happens, then that will happen as a result, a sequence that is key to a child's logical development and expression. Knowing patterns allows a child to make predictions, which is crucial when it comes to decoding skills in the difficult process of learning to read. Of course, she is also learning words and learning to enjoy their rhyme and rhythm. And above all, she is associating a book with comfort and loving attention, so that literacy becomes a natural assumption.

Traditional songs such as "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" **[slide 8]** involve animal noises that encourage identification and cumulative memory retention.

Old MacDonald had a farm,

Ee-ay, ee-ay, oh!
And on that farm he had a horse,
Ee-ay, ee-ay, oh!
With a neigh-neigh here,
And a niegh-neigh there,
Here a neigh, there a neigh,
Everywhere a neigh-neigh!
Old MacDonald had a farm,
Ee-ay, ee-ay, oh!

The pictures that accompany these songs also teach visual literacy, presenting not only the physical image of a creature, but also an imaginative, witty interpretation of the creature's characteristics. From books like this, even a toddler learns that images comprise patterns of line, color, shape, texture, and composition—the more imaginative the image, the more imaginative the child's sense of artistry.

Nursery rhymes such as "This Little Piggy" **[slide 9]** from the English tradition or "This Little Cow" from the Chinese integrate wordplay with physical activity, a connection reinforced by many books for toddlers that involve games of touching or body movement. **[slide 4]** The English rhyme is very close to the Chinese:

This little piggy went to market
This little piggy stayed home
This little piggy had roast beef
This little piggy had none
And this little piggy said wee wee wee
All the way home.

* * *

This little cow eats grass, **[slide 10]**
This little cow eats hay,
This little cow drinks water,
This little cow runs away,
And this little cow does nothing
But lie down all the day.

The physical repetition reinforces patterns of expectation in language and narrative, increasing the child's ability to incorporate these patterns in speech and writing later on. There are, by the way, astonishing parallels between other English and Chinese nursery rhymes: "Lady bug, Lady bug, fly away home/ Your house is on fire, your children will burn," says a rhyme from the West. "Lady bug, lady bug,/ Fly away, do!/ Fly to the mountain/ To feed upon dew," says a rhyme from the East. **[slide 11]**

Riddles are another word game at a more advanced stage in the child's conceptual development; this Native American compilation shows how riddles enhance a child's sense of language as well as stretching her imagination and imparting a sense of cultural wit. **[slide 12]** "The cave has a pig in it," say the Chatino Indians of Mexico. "It's the tongue in your mouth."

Every culture has lullabies, play-songs, nursery rhymes, and riddles such as these, and every culture has cumulative tales that reinforce concepts of cause and effect and of cumulative development. When an acorn falls on foolish Henry Penny **[slide 13]**, she tells Cocky Locky that the sky is falling, and Cocky Locky tells Ducky Lucky, and Ducky Lucky tells Goosey Loosey, and Goosey Loosey tells Turkey Lurkey and Turkey Lurkey tells . . . Foxy Loxy, who offers to shelter them all in his cave, and that's the end of the feathered fowl . . . and that's the fate of all fools. The Armenian story One Fine Day **[slide 14]** depends on a similar chain reaction, with a happier ending, when a woman cuts off the tail of a fox that has drunk

her pail of milk and then promises to sew back his tail if he'll bring her more milk. Then he must beseech each creature in turn for a favor: "Hen, dear hen, please give me an egg to give to the peddler in payment for the bead to get the jug to fetch the water to give the field to get some grass to feed the cow to get the milk that I must give the old woman in return for my tail."

The Indian fable Seven Blind Mice **[slide 15]** depicts a guessing game in which the mice are trying to figure out—by feeling different parts of a creature they cannot see—just what he is. Children who already know that the creature is an elephant can feel superior to the silly mice—a feeling of superiority children don't often have—and at the same time they can absorb a new piece of knowledge, that each person's perception of something depends on what part of it she sees. What the child enjoys is the narrative suspense of watching the mice repeat their mistakes and finally come to the right conclusion; what she gains from this pattern is rich insight disguised as entertainment.

Children experience episodic repetition as a form of suspense, all the more so if each episode enlarges or expands the situation. In the Norwegian story "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" **[slide 16]**, the appearance of each bigger goat brother heightens the suspense of an eventual battle with the Troll. There's no stronger urge, at the oral stage of development, than eating; and eating naturally engenders the fear of being eaten. Little children are afraid of being gobbled up just as adults, on a less literal level, are afraid of being consumed by forces beyond their control. The old cumulative tale "In a Dark Dark Wood" vividly reflects children's fear of being swallowed up by the dark: "In a dark dark wood, there was a dark, dark house. And in that dark dark house, there was a dark dark room. And in that dark dark room there was a dark dark chest. And in that dark dark chest, there was a dark dark shelf. And on that dark dark shelf, there was a dark dark box. And in that dark dark box, there was . . . A GHOST!"

[slide 17]

Of course, the most fearsome force of all is the uncontrolled creature within us, what Freud called the Id. Many cultures recognize this in tales such as "The Eye of the Needle," a far north Inuit/Yupik story about a little boy who, sent out by his grandmother to catch fish for their meal, eats every fish he sees from smallest to largest **[slide 18]** until he's too big to fit back into his house. Going through the eye of his grandmother's magical bone needle, which symbolizes the love of an understanding elder, helps him solve the problem and become more generous into the bargain. In the Persian tale of The Red Lion **[slide 19]**, Azgid discovers that it is his own fear he must conquer rather than the fierce animal he thought he must fight in order to become a prince. As the narrative patterns become more complex, so do the issues of morality and values for which the simpler tales have laid a groundwork. The child stretches from patterns of language, to patterns of narrative, to patterns of human behavior, learning to recognize a variety of acceptable ways to express and even cope with archetypal situations.

Sometimes the only way a small, helpless creature can win out over fearsome forces is to trick them, which is one reason children—along with oppressed peoples of all ages—relate (and relate to) trickster tales with such glee. When Brer Rabbit fools Brer Fox in African American stories from the southern United States **[slide 20]**, or when Anancy fools the devilish Mr. Dry-Bone in African American tales from the Caribbean **[slide 21]**, we hear echoes of much older trickster tales from Africa. Sometimes the trickster himself is tricked, as in the case of the innocent lamb, Borreguita, fooling Coyote **[slide 22]** in a Mexican tale.

Yet wiles and wit are not the only way for the weak to win the day. Some rely on spiritual powers that are variously represented by magic helpers, as in the mermaid who rescues this African American girl from her cruel stepfather in Sukey and the Mermaid **[slide 23]**, or simply by inner resources, as in the symbolic capability of slaves to fly away when their masters' cruelty goes beyond endurance in The People Could Fly **[slide 24]**. The motif of flying to freedom permeates even contemporary African American stories such as Tar Beach **[slide 25]**, in which a young girl takes her brother on a fantastical flight over New York City from their urban rooftop, which they call Tar Beach because it's the closest they can come to a seashore picnic.

Social tensions and transitions are a breeding ground for folktales; The Invisible Hunters **[slide 26]**

reflects a political Nicaraguan conflict between traditional Miskito Indian ways of conserving resources and recent commercial materialism that exploits resources. The tale uses an old pattern to pose a new political dilemma: three hunters eat a vine of invisibility, called the Dar; at first using their advantage to bag more game to feed their tribe, they later betray their hungry people to become rich off traders' money but are eventually punished by wandering forever invisible, calling "Dar Dar Dar." Legends also grow out of natural disasters. The perennial problem of drought in certain areas of Africa provides the backdrop for a Maasai story called "The Orphan Boy," [slide 27] in which an old man suffers when his curiosity proves more powerful than his trust in a star child with secret powers from the heavens.

In representing the voices of a people, folktales are sometimes difficult to translate cross-culturally into printed format. How does one re-create the tonal nuance of voice and gesture in a book, not to mention the assumed details of cultural context? A number of innovative publications prove that the problem can be solved with great aesthetic success. *Lord of the Dance*, for instance, [slide 28] is a picture book that almost begs to be chanted and danced, a physical aspect often neglected in the modern representation of folklore in print. The narrative is poetically rhythmic without becoming singsong or forced. The art leaps with color and strikingly balanced shapes. The concept itself is lyrical: the Mask leaves the spirit world and comes among men and women to lead their songs of joy and sadness. Even when traditions seem buried in concrete and steel, the voice survives here. Folk art motifs border many of the pictures, and a note on the cultural life of the Senufu people, as well as on Véronique Tadjó's collection and adaptation of the song, provide valuable context. A map with the Cote d'Ivoire together with photos of a traditional Senufu artist and of the illustrator Tadjó are also included.

Similarly, Leanne Hinton's *Ishi's Tale of Lizard* [slide 29] retains the flavor of a tradition unfamiliar to many new listeners. After acknowledgments and an introduction describing the culture that died with Ishi, the last of the Yahi people in California, Hinton describes the way Ishi's stories were transcribed and translated, and how she has adapted them as truly as possible to the words he used.

Lizard.

He made arrows.

He worked at his arrowmaking.

At dawn, he smoothed down the arrow-shaft canes.

He made arrows.

He rubbed the arrow shafts smooth.

He worked at his arrowmaking.

That's what he did.

Read aloud, this text begins to fall into a choral/response pattern all its own. From both an artistic and folkloristic point of view, Ishi's story of Lizard is an intriguing one, and young listeners or independent readers will find that the repetition makes for rhythmic reading aloud. Punctuated by the refrain "That's what he did," Ishi's tale describes Lizard sending a long-tailed relative out to get wood for arrow shafts and then killing a grizzly bear that eats the relative (who is swallowed alive and rescued, like Red Riding Hood). The chant-like narrative is illustrated with highly textured rice paper collages that stylize the figures and landscape. As a folktale in picture book format, this makes landmark efforts not to abandon its cultural context for easy listening by contemporary preschool children. At the same time, a young audience given to understand differences in culture can accept the fragmented quality of the text with ease in response to the sturdy cadence and striking art.

Folktales not only give children a glimpse of other cultures, they also give us new perspective on our own by serving as reference points for satire, spoof, and social commentary. In most serious versions of the Grimm Brothers' "Frog Prince," [slide 30] the princess turns the frog into a prince, but in Gwynne's *Pondlarker* [slide 31], the frog takes one look at the princess and decides to remain an amphibian, while in Berenzy's *Frog Prince* [slide 32], the rejected frog finds a more attractive mate of his own choosing.

In “The Story of the Three Little Pigs,” **[slide 33]** the wolf gobbles up the pigs who have built their houses of straw or sticks but is defeated by the pig who builds his house of bricks. This is supposed to show the value of industry over laziness, but the message gets an existential twist when it’s told from the wolf’s point of view in *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by A. Wolf. **[slide 34]** After all, the wolf only wanted to borrow a cup of sugar from the pig next door, but just happened to have a bad cold that made him sneeze, which by chance blew down the house and killed the pig, which would have been wasteful for the wolf to leave uneaten. The revision of such an archetypal villain into a victim makes us laugh at our conventions—and at ourselves as represented in those conventions.

The *Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* **[slide 35]** moves from satire to spoof in a complete role reversal of heroes and villains, while *The Three Little Pigs and the Fox* [No slide] helps us to remember that not all heroes are male, including a little girl piglet who triumphs over this bushy-tailed rascal. Most versions of *Red Riding Hood*, whether they’re traditional **[slide 36]** or scary **[slide 37]** or comic **[slide 38]**, show the little girl as being rescued from the wolf by a big hunter; but in the Chinese version *Lon Po Po* **[slide 39]**, the wolf’s intended victim courageously liberates both herself and her two sisters. Folktales thus challenge our conventional patterns as well as reinforcing them, and folkloric motifs rise like a Phoenix in original stories like *The Amazing Bone* **[slide 40]**, in which a young pig is saved from the jaws of a fox by an unusual magic helper—a bone that speaks in any language.

For centuries, of course, literary tales have built on folktales to the extent that it is sometimes hard to distinguish between them. The Greek myth “Cupid and Psyche” (Tale Type 425C) was based on an older folktale and elaborated by Apuleius in *The Golden Ass* during the middle of the second century A.D. From there the story entered the oral tradition again to appear as the related folktale “East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” **[slide 41]** which was collected and printed in Norway in the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, in the eighteenth century, the literary fairy tale “Beauty and the Beast” (Tale Type 425A) **[slide 42]** grew from a French folktale related to “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” and was widely circulated in print, returning from there to the oral tradition to be collected in folktale form later in the nineteenth century. Thanks to the activity of storytelling in both oral and literary traditions, we now have myriad printed and illustrated versions of “Cupid and Psyche,” “East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” and “Beauty and the Beast”—all stories rich in symbolism for young and old. We also have related stories such as the African *Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters* **[slide 43]**, Native American *The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses* **[slide 44]**, and Russian *The Red Flower* **[slide 45]**.

After studying “Beauty and the Beast” for three decades, I recently came across the oldest beast-

human figurine we have, the Lion Man, found in Hohlenstein, Germany, and made of mammoth ivory 32,000 years ago. **[slide 46]** Note that Jean Cocteau’s and Walt Disney’s beast-humans are also a lion-like! There’s also a 32,000 year-old pictogram of a buffalo and woman coupling, which Werner Herzog filmed inside the Chauvet caves of Southern France (*The Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, 2010).

Aladdin **[slide 47]** and *Ali Baba* **[slide 48]** are literary reworkings of folkloric tales that now serve as cultural reference points for both Eastern and Western societies. Less popularized but nevertheless widely available are ancient creation myths such as the *The Fire Children* from the Akan people of West Africa [slide 49], in which two spirit people peek from the mouth of the great sky god Nyame and are sneezed down to newly created earth, where they bake clay children to the various skin colors we are still born with today. Legends based on real characters such as *Chengis Khan* **[slide 50]**, shown here learning from the Persians to use “the fire that flies,” and epics such as the *Ramayana* [slide 51], in which Rama’s general Hanuman battles with the evil forces of Ravanna, inspire new generations in the richly illustrated medium of children’s literature. In fact, even illustrations get fresh life from reproductions such as this, in which the art from a sixteenth-century Mughal manuscript has been published in a children’s book by the Smithsonian Institution’s Freer Gallery of Art.

All humans of all ages have within them the elements of hero and of villain. Folktales, legends, myths,

and epics help us to distinguish one element from the other and to make decisions about which we shall choose. By communicating social experience through archetypal characters and symbolic conflict, traditional stories help us to pattern our lives in a socially thoughtful way. The more confused and threatening our global situation becomes, the more we need to understand stories that have cast light on the pathways of the past. Surely the children who must formulate peaceful alternatives to nuclear extinction can find inspiration in the epic of Gilgamesh [slide 52], where Enkido teaches the king to be human by showing mercy after their battle for supremacy [slide 53].

* * * [slide 54]

We speak to the baby in a language that orders chaos, but it is the baby herself who perceives the pattern. We do not wait until she can understand what we say. Rather, we trust that her perception of patterns will allow her to order the chaos of our babel. That process is a learning model for literacy and literature. The stories we tell and read to a child will predate her own reading—even her own full understanding—by many years. Yet from these stories she will perceive the language and narrative patterns that will enable her to speak with coherence, read with understanding, and absorb her traditions.

Why do we sing lullabies to a baby? Why do we say nursery rhymes? Why chant along with the games we play on a toddler's fingers and toes? Why tell our children stories of what happened to us when we were young? Why pass on tales of the African trickster Anansi or the Greek trickster Odysseus in a library story hour? Why read poetry aloud in a classroom? Why lead children to read literature or view art at all? The answer to the first question is the answer to them all, for they are inextricably connected. We offer children patterns that give comfort through rhythm and repetition, patterns that identify shapes of human behavior, patterns that lead to understanding a random world, and ultimately, patterns that lead to understanding themselves. At a time when miraculous technologies often convey words devoid of deep meaning, we can renew ourselves with old patterns of story. The child's book is one important place where such patterns still live, a house of story. Sadly, books that store these stories too often go out of print—a topic for another lecture—but libraries like the one we're in allow them to live on.

Folklorist Howard Norman quotes the Cree Indians of North America as saying that stories wander through the world looking for a person, inhabit that person for a while, and then are told back out into the world again. A symbiotic relationship exists: If people nourish a story properly, it tells them useful things about life. We need to nourish our stories, house them in libraries, and release them back into the world for the sake of our children's future.

Thank you for listening to this long story!

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