



Heather Forest

Storyteller/Author



Nationally acclaimed storyteller/author, Heather Forest brings world folktales to life in the imagination of her listeners. An award-winning author of nine children's books based on multicultural folktales, she engagingly creates language arts connections between the spoken and written word. She has delighted audiences of all ages with her unique storytelling style that interweaves original folk music, poetry, prose, and the sung and spoken word. Her *Tapestry of Multicultural Tales* concert is presented with a focus on historical background and cultural context of the tales she shares.

TEACHER STUDY GUIDE

A Tapestry of Multicultural Tales

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Folktales are windows into other cultures and reflect the diversity and commonality of the human experience. Studying folktales allows contemporary people to experience diverse cultures of long ago, and to gain insight into present day descendants of those cultures. Through these old tales, we can observe the differences and commonalities of cultures around the world. Folktales also enable us to empathize with contemporary cultures that are unfamiliar. Since folktales deal with universal life experience, they can offer enlightening insights into traditions and values.

What is a Folktale?

Folktales are oral narratives that do not have a singular, identifiable author. Expanded and shaped by the tongues of tellers over time, and passed down from one generation to the next, folktales often reflect the values and customs of the culture from which they come. Because folktale plots are generally concerned with life's universal themes, they also transcend their culture of origin to reveal the commonality of human experience. This ancient form of narrative communication for both education and entertainment, not only offers a window into other cultures, but also can be a revealing mirror of the comedy and pathos of our lives.

The Art of Storytelling

Storytelling is one of humanity's oldest art forms and educational method. Cultures around the world have utilized the art of storytelling to pass on values, life lessons and practical information. The ancient art of storytelling is especially well-suited for student exploration. As a folk art, storytelling is accessible to all ages and abilities. No special equipment beyond the imagination and the power of listening and speaking is needed to create artistic images. As a learning tool, storytelling can encourage students to explore their unique expressiveness and can heighten their ability to communicate thoughts and feelings in an articulate, lucid manner. They may also explore their own cultural roots through stories and folklore. These benefits transcend the art experience to support daily life skills. In our fast-paced, media-driven world, storytelling can be a nurturing way to remind children that their spoken words are powerful, that listening is important, and that clear communication between people is an art.

Written Versions of Folktales

Before mass media became a dominant storyteller for the modern world, local indigenous storytellers in cultures everywhere preserved the oral tales. Now, unless one can travel to situations where there are traditional tellers who carry on the oral tradition of their people, the best place to research multicultural folktales is to peruse the print versions available in the 398.2 section of the public library.

398.2 - Finding a Treasury of Folktales in the Library.

The 398.2 section of the library is a part of the Dewey Decimal System that organizes the book collections of public libraries and school libraries into subject categories to make it easier to locate literary materials. The folktales, fairytales and fables of the world are shelved in this nonfiction area. Both the children's section and the adult section of the library have a 398.2 folktale area. These simplified versions of multicultural oral tales are an excellent source of folktale plots with which to explore the storytelling process. By retelling folktales one can gain insights into the similarities and differences of peoples around the world.

Ode to 398.2 A Song by Heather Forest

I've traveled around the world
without leaving home.
I go anywhere
my imagination wants to roam.
I take a look,
in a folktale book,
and travel on the wings of words.
Soaring off to far away places,
ancient times,
or magical spaces,
I find a fantasy view...
reading a book
from the library shelf
marked
398.2

Finding Multicultural Folktales Online:

A collection of one-page multicultural tales retold by Heather Forest and designed for student retelling can be found at the *Stories in a Nutshell* web page:

<http://www.storyarts.org/library/nutshell/index.html>

A resource from Story Arts Online:
www.storyarts.org

Multicultural Storytelling and Social Studies

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Folktales are shelved in the non-fiction section of the library under "Social Sciences" ([398.2](#)). Studying a folktale offers a window into the culture from which it comes, as well as a mirror of humanity, since universal concerns are reflected in world tales.

Deeply Investigating A Folktale

Have students research folktales in the 398.2 section of the library. Have each select a folktale and investigate some of the following topics to gain insight into the context in which the tale might have been told.

Global Reference

Find the location on a world map of the country or culture from which the story comes. Research the geography and topography of the setting.

Historical Timeframe

Place the tale in a timeframe of history. (Pre-industrial, ancient world, modern times, mythical time, etc.) Who collected the folktale and when? Is the print version obtained an original source document (told or written by an indigenous member of the culture), or a third person account (anthropologist, folklorist, writer)?

Geographic/ Historical Transportation

Has the tale traveled in any type of Diaspora? If so, in which culture can the earliest version be found? Are there interesting variations of plot told in other cultures? Are the variations connected to the source or have the variations on the theme resulted from a universal element addressed by the plot?

Specific Cultural Context

To be able to authentically understand or include accurate details in the retelling of the folktale, have students research the following background information:

- What are, or were, the dominant religious or philosophical influences on the story?
- When or why would the story be told? (As entertainment, ritual, sacred observance, education, etc.?)

To better understand the life style of the people who told this tale:

- Research any housing, tools or attire of the culture described or mentioned in the folktale.
- Research any aspects of daily life or customs reflected by the folktale.

Science

How does the environment of the tale's setting affect the story? If animals or natural elements are included, are the animals accurately or metaphorically depicted? Does the topography determine the action?

Math

Create a timeline of the plot. Investigate structures in the plot: equations or balancing elements, cause-and-effect situations, sequences, prediction, etc.

Higher Thinking Skills

Have students analyze the plot for its metaphorical levels. Compare versions of the plot from different cultures. Create an original retelling of the plot using descriptive language, dialogue, and an awareness of underlying metaphor.

Social Studies Extensions

Visual Arts

Have students create:

- A painting or drawing of a poignant moment of a folktale
- A picture book based on a folktale
- A poster advertising a Storytelling Festival
- A story mural

Art History

Have students research paintings or sculpture inspired by the elements in the story or by myth, legend, or folklore in general. After learning the artwork's background tale, have students orally present both the artwork and its accompanying story.

Expressive Arts: Drama/Literature

Have students create:

- A play based on a folktale
- A radio show based on the plot
- A ballad that retells the plot
- A retelling of the plot as a story with descriptive detail and dialogue

BECOMING A STORYTELLER

Becoming a storyteller can build confidence in one's verbal abilities and can bring the storyteller to an awareness of his or her unique imagination. Storytelling encourages listening skills and is interactive community fun! Retelling multicultural folktales can encourage cultural awareness and understanding.

SELECTING A PLOT

In the oral tradition, a story is an invisible treasure that can be carried around inside of the imagination and memory of a teller. It can be shared with listeners through social interaction and the magic of the spoken word. The plot of an oral tale is the raw material from which a storyteller artfully creates a vivid "story" experience for a listener. To begin practicing the art of storytelling, choose a plot to explore. Tellable plots can be found in folktale books, in narrative folksongs, by collecting a tale about the "old days" from an elder, by recounting an episode from history, by remembering an interesting personal experience, or by inventing an original fantasy. Traditional folktales and fables currently printed in books were once passed by word of mouth. Both poignant and metaphorical, global folktales and fables are often used by beginning storytellers as a simple source of plot material.

HINTS ABOUT LEARNING THE PLOT

After reading or hearing a tale, personalize it by imagining the sequence of events like an "interior movie." Imagine the setting, all the characters, and the objects in the tale. Re-read or re-think the plot until you can confidently recall the timeline, or sequence of events of the tale. Watch the "movie" with your mind's eye several times and allow the details to become more elaborate. Using the colorful tool of the imagination, a simple plot can expand to be an evocative story in the theater of the mind. Then, the teller could simply "chat" the tale informally to a listener. A more stylized presentation could include dialogue between characters in the plot. The plot could be told in verse, song, or from the vantage point of one of the characters. Most basically however, in order to retell a plot as an effective story, a storyteller must be able to remember "what happened" and then freely describe the events in order.

IMPROVISING LANGUAGE

We improvise language naturally when we answer questions, give directions, make excuses, or engage in conversation. Storytellers improvise language while describing the events in a story in order to help the listener picture the tale clearly. Unlike forgetting the memorized words to a poem or a song, one would not forget the “words” to a story if the plot’s sequence of events plays like a movie behind the eyes. A storyteller can describe how one event leads to the next, taking the listener through the journey of the tale from beginning to end. After many tellings of the same tale, the storyteller’s words may evolve into a repeated text. Yet, with each telling, new flourishes and details can still be added, and the story can continue to grow.

WORDS PAINT PICTURES

The storyteller's words are like a painter's colors. Changing just one word spoken in a sentence can alter the picture or detail a listener is imagining. For example, construct a sentence without any adjectives. Add some descriptive words and see how the picture evoked by the words changes.

A man walked down the road.

A tattered old man walked down the hot dusty road.

A young man walked down a crowded city road.

EXPRESSIVENESS: EXPLORE THE FULL POTENTIAL OF THE VOICE AND BODY

Storytelling can be enhanced by allowing the sound of the voice and body language to reflect the story being told. In our everyday life we speak with our bodies as well as our voices. We shrug shoulders, raise eyebrows, purse lips, pucker, wince, grimace, smile, wonder, pout, shake hands, and use an endless variety of gestures to augment our verbal conversation. For example, how would you say the following sentences without speaking?

"It's too hot."

"I'm impatient."

"It's freezing here."

"I'm tired."

"SSHHH! Be quiet."

"Come quickly."

"What did you say?"

"Stay back! Danger!"

PRACTICE! PRACTICE!

A story grows each time it's told as it becomes more vivid in the imagination of the storyteller. New details may enter the storyteller's mental picture of the tale. Those new details then can be brought out in the telling of the story for the listener to enjoy. The best way to improve storytelling skills is to tell stories.

For More Information on Storytelling visit:

www.storyarts.org

Story Arts Online is an educational Web site that explores the use of storytelling in the classroom to enhance students' speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. The site includes storytelling lesson plans and activities, a story library of Aesop's fables and world folktales, links to other storytelling sites, lists of recommended classroom resources, and an audio theater

Some Story Skeletons to Retell

Story Skeletons are the bare bones of the tale . . . the simplest chronological sequence of events. Additional detail, setting and characterization can be added to "flesh out" the story as you retell it. Sometimes it's more appropriate to the context of telling to share a short version of the tale you wish to tell. Other times a more detailed telling is warranted. Be sensitive to the needs of your listener. Communicate with your words, body, facial expression and sound and the listener will "see" and experience the tale in their mind's eye. Everyone's imagination is different and so each listener hears a unique tale. Retellings of the same tale may differ from teller to teller.

Making a Personal Connection to Folktales

Try retelling the following folktales adding generous detail. As metaphorical stories, see if they can also prompt the recollection of personal narrative.

A FLOCK OF BIRDS...a Fable from India

There was once a flock of peacefully pecking seeds under a tree. A hunter came along and threw a heavy net over them. He said, "Aha! Now I have my dinner!" All at once the birds began to flap their wings...together! Up, up, up they rose, taking the net with them. They came down on a tree and as the net snagged in the tree's branches, the birds flew out from under it to freedom. The hunter looked on in amazement, scratched his head and muttered, "As long as those birds cooperate like that with one another, I'll never be able to capture them! Each one of those birds is so small and yet, together they could lift the net!"

Have you ever been able to do something with the help of others that you could not do alone? What happened?

Personal Tale Title _____

THE SUN AND THE WIND ... an Aesop's Fable from Ancient Greece

The wind and the sun argued about which of them was the strongest. They decided to hold a contest. The sun suggested that they see who could take the coat off of a man walking along the road below them. The wind blew hard, but the man, feeling chilly, held his coat tightly around him. The sun then became gently warmer and warmer. The man felt so hot, he took off his coat. Sometimes, they say, you can get your way more easily with gentleness than by force.

Has there ever been a time when gentle persuasion helped you get your way in a group? What happened?

Personal Tale Title _____

THE STOLEN AX . . . A Taoist Tale from China

A woodcutter went out one morning to cut some firewood and discovered that his favorite ax was missing. He couldn't find it anywhere. Then he noticed his neighbor's son standing near the woodshed. The woodcutter thought, "Aha! That boy must have stolen my ax. I see how he lurks about the shed, shifting uneasily from foot to foot, greedy hands stuffed in his pockets, a guilty look on his face. I can't prove it, but he MUST have stolen my ax."

A few days later the woodcutter was surprised and happy to come upon the ax under a pile of firewood. "I remember now," he said, "Just where I'd left it!"

The next time he saw his neighbor's son, the woodcutter looked intently at the boy, scrutinizing him from head to toe. How odd, he thought, somehow this boy has lost his guilty look . . .

Have you ever misjudged someone by looking only at appearances? What happened?

Personal Tale Title _____



AFTER LISTENING TO STORIES

Here are some follow-up activities to explore after listening to a storyteller tell a story.

Talk about the story

- Compare how listeners imagined the story. Did listeners "see" it inside their imaginations?
- Have listeners describe where the story happened (the setting of the story) and the people, animals, or things in the story (the characters.) Did they imagine the same details?

-Did the stories have a problem that was solved? How was it solved?

-Did any of the stories bring up any ideas worth thinking about?

Sharing, cooperation, friendship, point of view, personal experience episodes and so on?

Visual Art Activities: Explore Diversity by Comparing Imaginations

-Invite listeners to draw their favorite moments. If there are several people drawing, compare pictures and see how differently everyone pictured the characters.

Oral Interpretation: Reading Out Loud / Listening to Stories:

-Read printed stories out-loud allowing the characters in the text to come to life in a dramatic way portraying both the narrator and all the characters in the tale. In order to read a story out loud with expression, try to picture the story in your own imagination as you are reading it. The more you imagine the characters, setting and action, the more expressive the reading may become!

Remembering the Plot and Retelling the Story:

-Ask listeners to remember what happened in the story (the temporal sequence of events). Reconstruct the plot by remembering what happened first...next...then what? Make a map of the tale. Have listeners retell the story in their own words. Improvise the language by imagining the tale as a "movie" on the mind and tell "what happened."

Words Paint Pictures

Be generous with description! The storyteller's words are like a painter's colors. Changing just one word in a sentence can alter the picture or detail a listener is imagining. For example, construct a sentence without any adjectives. Add some descriptive words and see how the picture evoked by the words changes.

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Collecting Stories from Family Elders

A classroom can be a global pallet of students whose family roots are diverse. Encourage students to interview elders in their family who might bring insight into their family history and offer stories of any immigration that has taken place over time. For a list of effective interview questions see:

<http://storyarts.org/classroom/roots/family.html>



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Heather Forest, Ph.D. is a storyteller, recording artist, and children's book author. She is founder and executive director of Story Arts Inc., a Long Island, NY based not-for-profit organization dedicated to the art of storytelling and its educational applications. Her folktale books and recordings have won numerous awards including the American Library Association's

Notable Recording Award and several Parents' Choice Gold Awards. For the past thirty five years, she has toured her performance repertoire of World Folktales for audiences of all ages to theatres, schools, conferences and major storytelling festivals throughout the United States and abroad. She has been featured at the National Storytelling Festival, Tennessee, the Museum of Modern Art, NY, The Smithsonian Institute, Wash. D.C., the Sidmouth International Folk Festival, England, and the Glistening Waters Storytelling Festival, New Zealand.

Dr. Forest holds a Master's Degree in Storytelling from East Tennessee State University and a Ph.D. In Leadership and Change from Antioch University. She is a recipient of the Circle of Excellence Award presented by the National Storytelling Network and is a Fulbright Senior Specialist in the Humanities.

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