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A Taste of Folktales Helps the Lessons Go Down

by Nancy Alder

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Ah, the age old problem: how to engage children's interest and make lessons understandable and memorable. The solution is as close as your library. Whether teaching in a formal classroom setting or trying to enhance school lessons at home, try flavoring the facts with some fun. Folktales are full of adventure and humor. For all their winning ways, they are also a useful teaching tool.

You can find folktales from all over the world and from every region of the United States. Woven through the stories is a wealth of information about the culture and the geography and conditions of the places from whence the tales originate. Listen to music from the land of origin—steel band or bagpipes or African kalimba. Get out the globe and find the country the folktale comes from. Talk about the region's climate, natural resources, and indigenous wildlife. Have the kids listen to the story or read it, keeping their minds open to hints of the culture and physical surroundings. What a palatable way to ingest some facts! Folktales can spice up lessons about geography, science, mythology, history, religion, ethics—virtually all aspects of the curriculum.

"Wiley and the Hairy Man,"¹ for example, originates in the bayou country of Louisiana. The setting for the story is a swamp, typical terrain for Louisiana. A colorful telling of the tale will evoke the feeling of a swamp. Readers will see the big bay trees dripping with moss and the stands of bamboo that Wiley tries to chop down; they will turn up their noses at the heady smell of moldering vegetation and envision the patches of quicksand waiting to catch the unwary. Wiley, the hero of the piece, poles a raft across the bayou as folk surely did in the past, and likely still do. Both Wiley's mama and his nemesis, the Hairy Man, know magic. The belief in supernatural power and in the ability to manipulate nature is common to bayou culture. In his encounter with the Hairy Man, Wiley challenges him to use his conjuring powers to "turn himself

¹Excellent versions of "Wiley and the Hairy Man" can be found on audio tape in *Favorite Stories* by Diane Ferlatte, Olde West Recording, 1991; and in *Why the Possum's Tail Is Bare and other classic southern stories* by Jimmy Neil Smith, Avon Books, 1993.

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into sumpin' he ain't." The Hairy Man obliges, magically becoming an alligator and a possum in turn. Both these animals are indigenous to the bayou area.

Through reading and listening to folktales, kids learn about the flora and fauna of the place, geographical facts, and aspects of culture without realizing they are doing anything other than having a good time. Subliminal learning!

What "Wiley and the Hairy Man" can do to teach about a part of Louisiana's culture, other folktales can do for *their* points of origin. The Anansi stories from West Africa teach about morality, underscore the consequences of going against social mores, and foster social cohesion. The stories are filled with clues about life in Ghana and Nigeria. The tales take place in the jungle and in villages and are filled with indigenous animals as characters. The notion of tribes and tribal authority runs through the stories.

Native American tales deal with values and with matters of concern to the cultures from which they spring. Pueblo storytellers weave tales of trickery and valor that revolve around matters which are still of vital interest to members of this desert society. Some tales deal with the loss and acquisition of water (rivers, rain, and well sites). Other tales deal with respect for authority, matters of honor, and man's connection and kinship with the natural world.

Where do you find these all-purpose treasures? Picture books, story collections, and audio tapes of folktales abound. A browse through the 398s in your favorite library (GR 74-76 in the Library of Congress classification system) will take you around the world through folktales. You can read a number of tales to gain an understanding of a particular place or culture. Or you can look for similarities and differences in a number of cultures by examining their folktales which address a particular topic. You will find the creation myth, for example, explained in almost every culture through folktale. You will find numerous versions of cautionary tales dealing with conceit, laziness, greed, and other undesirable character traits.

At a time when the differences between cultures, religions, and peoples serve to divide and alienate us, how nice it is to know that we can learn to recognize the commonality of mankind through a good read. Such good news! What's good for us needn't be a bitter pill after all. Learning *can* be fun!

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While you are sure to find your own favorites among folktale collections, I'd like to share with you some of my favorites:

Folktales from around the World. George Shannon. Greenwillow, 1985.

Keepers of the Earth. Joe Bruchac and Michael Caduto. Fulcrum, 1988.

The Crest and the Hide and other African Stories. Howard Courlander. Coward McCann, 1982.

Lazy Stories. Retold by Diane Wolkstein. Seabury Press, 1976.

Multicultural Folktales: Stories to Tell Young Children. Judy Sierra and Robert Kaminski. Oryx, 1991.

The Magic Orange Tree and other Haitian Folktales. Diane Wolkstein. Knopf, 1978.

Nancy Alder is a professional storyteller and educator. Her books and tapes, including *Tellin' Tales at School: A Manual for Teaching Storytelling in the Classroom* and *Storytelling Across the Curriculum*, are available at the BYU Bookstore, Deseret Book, and from the author. Alder offers workshops on storytelling and story creation through the BYU Department of Conferences and Workshops.