

L595: Advanced Storytelling Workshop
Fall, 2002
Abbie Anderson

Story #1

I. The Nine Not Chosen

1) "The Hare Who Married a Princess". In Margaret Read MacDonald's Shake-It-Up Tales! Stories to Sing, Dance, Drum, and Act Out, pp. 103-107 (Riddle Stories). A Fon tale from Benin, retold from Why Goats Smell Bad and Other Stories from Benin by Raouf Mama.

Synopsis: A king with a beautiful daughter sets a test for her suitors: the one who would win her hand must first drink from a pot of boiling water. Though many wealthy, brave and handsome princes try, none can do it. The hare succeeds by taking so long to sing the princess' praises, going from courtier to courtier to describe the girls' beauty and his undying love and to tell them to proclaim both of the above to their children and children's children, that the water cools and he can drink.

Notes: MacDonald suggests that the teller interact directly with the audience during the hare's speeches, and to mime testing the water until it is cool enough (young audiences especially delight in guessing ahead of time what he is up to). She also encourages improvisation of those praise speeches: "wander around the audience, expanding the story as long as you wish."

I came close to choosing this story. I love a good trickster, and the audience engagement sounded like fun, too. But then I thought I might save that level of "fun" 'til I have more experience working in front of an audience. ☺

Audience: I often have trouble assigning an age range to these things, because I love the stories at age 37, and think they're for everybody. I don't have a lot of experience yet in working with the various age ranges, so my judgment of age-appropriateness will improve with time.

Most of MacDonald's notations seem to assume an audience of preschoolers or early grades. I would guess that this story would go over well with kindergarteners through 3rd grade, but could also do well in a family hour with adults and older kids. Everybody can appreciate the Hare's trick, along with the "verbal art" of his speeches praising the princess.

2) "What a Wonderful Life!" In Shake-It-Up Tales, pp. 124-130 (Dramatic Play). Retold from Jewish folk tradition.

Synopsis: An old man and his wife live contentedly in their peaceful, quiet cottage ("What a wonderful life!"). Then one night the old man suddenly notices

all the little noises in the house (rocking chair squeaks, knitting needles clack, wife hums while she knits), and he can't stand it. "What a horrible life!" He goes to a wise man for advice, and is told to get a cat—which only adds to the noise. He goes back to the wise man several more times, and each time is told to bring another animal home (dog, rooster, goat, cow), each of which only makes the noise worse. Finally the old man goes back one more time, and the wise man tells him to take away each of the animals. Now all of the familiar noises of home no longer bother him. "What a wonderful life!"

Notes: In this cumulative tale the repetition of each of the noises as the string grows in length adds to the delight of the telling. Much potential for fun hamming up in acting out the noises. MacDonald suggests dividing the audience to perform the different sounds in a participatory telling. I'll definitely come back to this one.

Audience: Small children will love the raucous sound effects; grown-ups should smile at the message about contentment, distraction, and cutting out the things you've brought into your life that make too much noise. Middle graders and Jr. High-ers will probably be too "cool" to let themselves get into it.

3) "Parley Garfield and the Frogs". In Margaret Read MacDonald's Twenty Tellable Tales: Audience Participation Folktales for the Beginning Storyteller, pp. 52-56.

Synopsis: Parley Garfield has to cross a crick in order to visit his sweetheart. To find out whether it's too deep to get across on foot, he calls out to the frogs, "How deep is it?" The different frogs answer successively, "Ankle deep," "knee deep," "belly deep," and finally, "You better go 'round!"

Notes: MacDonald says that she learned this story from her grandfather—but later heard it told by Joseph DuPuis, a Potawatami and Sac/Fox Indian who learned it from *his* grandfather. While the story is short on paper, much fun can be had with the different frog voices (from peepers to bullfrogs) and audience participation on the calls back and forth. One could also add a little more backstory in the beginning, about Parley and his sweetheart. The idea of perseverance, with help from the animal world, is appealing. MacDonald suggests dividing the audience to be the different frogs, and provides musical notation for the different calls.

Audience: Again, little ones will love the frog-calls, and the idea of frogs helping you get across a crick. There is less depth of theme here for older kids and adults, but I still have a hard time thinking they couldn't like it!

4) "Roly Poly Rice Ball". In Twenty Tellable Tales, pp. 104-114. Inspired by Elizabeth Scofield's Hold Tight, Stick Tight; cf. Junichi Yoda's The Rolling Rice Ball.

Synopsis: A kind, poor old Japanese man loses one of three rice balls down a hole—and hears singing voices calling it in. He rolls a second and finally his

last rice ball into the hole, and then receives an invitation himself to “Roll right in!” He does so, and lands in Mouse Country. The mice sing and dance for him, show him gracious hospitality, and give him a magic golden hammer that when shaken fills a table with good food. He returns home and delights his wife with this precious gift. His greedy neighbor hears the story and sees the hammer at work, and resolves to get one for himself. He forces his way into Mouse Country even though he is *not* called, and steals a golden hammer he finds there. *His* hammer, however, fills his table with mud, slime, spiders, slugs, etc.

Notes: MacDonald says that preschoolers enjoy getting up and dancing with the Mouse Maidens, and she does crafts with them to make fans for the mice to dance with. She provides her own musical notation for the song, since she was not able to find an original source (I might try to dig one up that might have appeared after the publication of this book). I love this charming tale, with its magical animals and its familiar themes of virtue rewarded and greed punished.

Audience: MacDonald obviously likes this one for preschoolers. I think it has great charm for adults as well, and for older kids and teens who will let themselves go to Mouse Country.

5) “Udala Tree”. In Twenty Tellable Tales, pp. 115-125. Adapted from Uche Ocheke’s Tales of Land of Death: Igbo Folk Tales.

Synopsis: An orphan boy lives with his stepmother and two stepbrothers, who mistreat him and make him do all the heavy labor. One day he finds the seed of an udala tree, plants it and tends it. He chants for it to grow, and with repeated chants it becomes a great tree that bears good fruit for him to eat. He tells his family to eat only the fruit that falls to the ground, and never to climb the tree or pick its fruit from the branches. When his two stepbrothers disobey this order, climbing in the tree and breaking its branches, the orphan chants for the tree to grow taller, and it carries the boys into the clouds. When his stepmother promises to treat him well, in front of the whole village, he chants for the tree to shrink and bring the boys back down. From then on he is given good food and light chores, and he always remembers to share the fruit of his magic tree.

Notes: I always appreciate MacDonald’s discussion of origins. She chose Ocheke’s version of this tale because the orphan’s chant includes statements about the temporary nature of man’s stay on earth. A variant from Adjai Robinson in Singing Tales of Africa gives a tune for the chant (with different words), which MacDonald does not use here. The chant is compelling, and I can see it really capturing an audience as they join in on the powerful “Nda!” magic word that causes the tree to grow and shrink. The Cinderella-like character of the abused step-child rewarded for kindness (with the message of generosity even to one’s enemies once you’ve made peace with them) has a classic appeal, with the nice touch of his active engagement in the solution of his problems.

Audience: I can see this working well for K-3rd grade (and, as almost always, for family hours).

6) "Punia and the King of the Sharks". In Twenty Tellable Tales, pp. 104-114. Adapted from Padraic Colum's "Punia and the king of the Sharks" in Legends of Hawaii.

Synopsis: A boy named Punia and his mother are very hungry. A gang of sharks keeps the people from diving in the bay and getting food from the sea. Punia tricks the sharks by throwing a rock into the water, and while they go after it he dives and brings up a lobster for his mother to eat. He repeats this trick on successive days, and then tricks the King of the Sharks into driving away his goons one by one, by accusing this one and that one of having been in on the trick with the rock. Finally only the King, Kai-Ale-Ale, is left, and he confronts his enemy. Punia tricks the King into swallowing him whole and then spitting him up on the shore, where the boy jumps out and the villagers kill King Kai-Ale-Ale.

Notes: MacDonald suggests engaging the audience as Punia picks out which of the goon sharks to drive away ("That one! The one with the green shirt!"). She also says that Karen Bawden does a very dramatic version of this story, acting out all the rock throwing and swimming, in which Punia lives inside King Kai-Ale-Ale for three days by peeling off pieces of his fat from inside his stomach.

This one seems to me like one of the stories that grows in the telling. I wasn't drawn to it at first, but as I thought about telling it I recognized the "spell" it could cast, with Punia's bravery and the Bugs Bunny-ness of the trickery.

Audience: K-5th grade, with older kids getting the gorier version with Punia inside the shark and eatin' 'im.

7) "Mr. Fox". In Twenty Tellable Tales, pp. 154-162. Adapted from Joseph Jacobs' English Folk and Fairy Tales.

Synopsis: Lady Mary is betrothed to the bold and wealthy Mr. Fox. When he describes his castle but refuses to take her there, Mary goes in secret to see for herself. At the gate is a sign, "Be bold, be bold"; over the door another sign reads, "Be bold, be bold, but not too bold". She goes inside and over the gallery door is written the same warning, with the addition, "lest that your heart's blood should run cold!" Mary enters the gallery and is horrified to see the dismembered bodies of many beautiful ladies. She starts to run away, but sees Mr. Fox coming and hides behind a cask on the stairs. Coming up the stairs, Mr. Fox reaches down for a ring on one of his victims' hands, and when the ring won't come off he cuts off the hand. The violence of his action causes the hand to fly through the air, and it lands behind the cask—right on Mary's lap. Mr. Fox can't find the hand, and Mary slips away with the hand. Later, at the wedding breakfast, she tells about

her “dream” of finding his castle (and what she found there), and he repeatedly interjects “It is not so and it was not so,” growing increasingly agitated. Finally Mary confronts him with the hand, and her brothers cut Mr. Fox to pieces. “And this ends the story of the horrid Mr. Fox and the bold Lady Mary.”

Notes: This more involved horror story has a rich text, and will repay the teller who takes time with the words, methinks. I can imagine the quiet in the audience, and the reaction to the dramatic final build-up, when this is told well. A bold, resourceful heroine is always welcome (although she’s still up for marriage auction, and it’s her brothers who do away with the miscreant).

Audience: Late elementary and middle grades, with all the lovely gore and horror; family ghost story hours.

8) “The Magic Fox”. In Twenty Tellable Tales, pp. 174-180. Adapted from Elizabeth Scofield’s A Fox in One Bite.

Synopsis: In Japan, there are magic foxes who can change into anything they want. A boy named Zuiten serves in the temple where the golden statue of the Buddha sits, sweeping the floors and preparing the rice. One day while at the rice pot he thinks he hears someone calling his name, but no one is there. It turns out to be the fox, brushing his tail across the rice-paper door (“Zui”) and knocking the door with his head (“ten”). Zuiten hides beside the door, and the next time the fox knocks, Zuiten slides the door open and the fox falls head first inside the temple. Zuiten slams the door shut behind him, but the fox runs ‘round the temple and suddenly disappears—and now there are two golden Buddha statues. Zuiten tricks the fox into revealing himself by saying that when he prays, the *true* Buddha always sticks out his tongue; follows him into the kitchen; and gets into the rice pot. Stewing in the rice pot, the fox turns back into himself; Zuiten lifts the lid and out pops the fox, running away, never to trouble Zuiten again.

Notes: Like many Japanese stories, this one has great onomatopoeic sound effects. I also like its quiet, droll tone, and appreciate MacDonald’s reminder to hold the Buddha statue in appropriate reverence. This story combines the charms of a clever child, and a magical animal.

Audience: Um, preschool to 3rd grade?

9) “Fox’s Sack”. In David Holt and Bill Mooney’s Ready-to-Tell Tales, pp. 21-28. From England; contributed by Bill Harley, who wrote the songs.

Synopsis: Fox is very hungry, and all he has is an empty sack. He traps a bee in the sack and hatches a plan to fool his neighbors. He goes off singing, “Nobody knows what’s in my sack, nobody knows but me.” At each house, he asks a neighbor to watch the sack for him while he visits “my friend Squintum,” warning them not to open it. Each time they sing, “I wonder what’s in that sack”—and each time they open the sack, releasing what’s inside. When Fox comes back, he insists that they put something larger in the sack to replace what

was lost. Finally he goes home, thinking he has a neighbor's son in his sack to eat, but when he gets home he finds he's been tricked: it's the watchdog Buster, who chases him away. He sings sadly, "Everybody knew what was in my sack, everybody knew but me."

Notes: Another fun one, and even better if you play guitar or banjo (which I don't). Great opportunities for characterization, with Fox and all his neighbors. The song is good (can't get it out of my head, some days), and the theme of outwitting a trickster is always satisfying (although I always feel bad for the hungry trickster who loses a meal—I'm a weirdo who feels sorry for the "Silly Rabbit" in the Trix commercials).

Audience: Harley tells this tale to primary grades.

II. The Story Chosen: "Baby Rattlesnake"

"Baby Rattlesnake's First Rattle". In *Shake-It-Up Tales*, pp. 161-165 (Act-It-Out Tales). Adapted from Lynn Moroney's picture book, *Baby Rattlesnake*, based on a tale long told by Te Ata, Chickasaw storyteller. MacDonald discovered its Pawnee origins (see *Notes* below).

Synopsis: Baby Rattlesnake is so little that he has not yet grown a rattle on the end of his tail. He wants a rattle very badly. He goes to his mother, his father, his grandmother, and his grandfather, but they all tell him no: he is too little, and he will only get in trouble. He then pesters everybody in town about how much he wants a rattle, until they gather together, discuss the problem, and decide to give him a rattle—he'll only get in trouble, but maybe he'll learn something; and at least they'll have some peace. With his new rattle, Baby Rattlesnake decides to scare people. He scares the rabbit, and the turtle. Then the chief's daughter comes, and she is afraid of nothing. She slams her foot down on his rattle, breaking it and grinding it into the dirt. Baby Rattlesnake goes crying back to his family, and his grandfather admonishes him not to ask for something in future until he knows how to behave.

Notes: MacDonald references this story in Frances Densmore's *Pawnee Music*, a 1929 publication of the Bureau of American Ethnology ("Story of the Little Rattlesnake", pp. 107-108 in the 1972 Da Capo reprint edition). Densmore's version was collected from Mrs. Elfie Blain, who sang the story in its entirety using a repeated tune (which Densmore transcribed for her book; she does not, however, include a transcription of the Pawnee text or an exact English translation, only a paraphrase). Densmore apparently told Moroney about the Pawnee version when she asked for permission to adapt the picture book, and Moroney suggested that Te Ata might have learned it from a Pawnee singer during her Chautauqua tours in the 1920's. MacDonald originally made her adaptation with Wajuppa Tossa, "as a teaching tale for students in northeastern

Thailand.” Their version was published in 1997 by Mahasarakham University, in Storytelling as a Means of Preservation of Language and Culture and in the Process of Teaching and Learning, pp. 84-88. Quite a journey for this tale!

MacDonald does not include Densmore’s tune in her version (I was surprised to find it when I looked up the tale in Densmore). She likes to tell the tale twice with young audiences, the second time for audience participation in acting out the different characters’ parts. She also does a craft with the children afterwards, making snake-shaped rattles with popcorn stapled into folded paper, then decorated with pens.

It is interesting to compare the three versions. MacDonald concludes with a culturally-appropriate remonstrance about how to behave (a very strong theme in Plains Indian parenting traditions). Moroney’s picture book concludes with Baby Rattlesnake getting big hugs from his family. Densmore’s version from Elfie Blain, however, has Baby Rattlesnake’s older brother warning everyone that he’ll come to no good—and then shaking his head sadly over his brother’s lifeless form when the Chief’s daughter first gets bitten, and then smashes Baby Rattlesnake’s *head*. I have gone with MacDonald’s ending, which acknowledges Baby Rattlesnake’s misbehavior without having to kill him for it.

I have drawn on all three versions, with a slight assist from what I know about traditional Pawnee culture. In all the versions, it struck me that 1) the whole community is involved in deciding what to do about Baby Rattlesnake (it isn’t just up to his immediate family); and 2) Baby Rattlesnake’s behavior reflects on his family. When the community gets involved, they address his family in persuading them to let the kid have his rattle. I also stress the respected position of the Grandfather.

For my telling, I have set English words to the tune Densmore transcribed (see full copy of story for my lyrics). Rather than singing the story throughout as Mrs. Blain did, I use the tune as a refrain in the story (fitting more comfortably with American telling conventions). The process of finding those words, and then hearing the different characters sing the song, helped me focus my MIT (see IIA. Analysis, below). Using the song also led me to some departures from MacDonald’s version, of course.

I’ll confess that I chose this story in part because my husband, a linguist, works with the Pawnee language in his job at the American Indian Studies Research Institute (I was hoping that his bosses, who are Pawnee experts, might know the story and be able to point me to either a Pawnee original or a better translation—alas, no; it’s not part of their significant mythology or their hero stories, and as a “kiddie” story has gone largely overlooked). At first I thought it was a cute story but a little lightweight—until I started singing the song and exploring my MIT. I’m sure this is a common phenomenon for storytellers!

Audience: Toddlers and preschool through 1st or 2nd grade. Rebellion against being told “you’re too little” all the time will be a big hook for the littlest ones. Would also work well for family hour, since parents will appreciate (if

cringingly) both the dramatization of the whining child, and the message that sometimes you really just *aren't* ready for things yet. Older siblings may enjoy the story, too, since whining Baby Rattlesnake gets his comeuppance, and they can feel superior.

IIA. Analysis

1. Most Important Thing (MIT): “too little”

a). from child's perspective

Children, especially young children, are always being told that they're too little—“wait 'til you're older”; “you're not big enough yet”. They hear this all the time (or so it must seem), and it especially chafes when they have older siblings and/or older friends, and can't see why *they* can't do/have whatever it is, too. All of us can probably remember how frustrating that was, and we certainly see it all the time in children around us. Baby Rattlesnake gets to act this out.

b). from adults' perspective

Baby Rattlesnake really is too little to have a rattle, and he proves it by only using it to scare people and laugh at them—and by foolishly using it to try to scare a formidable person who could be a threat to him. He doesn't know how to behave with a rattle yet. He doesn't know what it's really for. He doesn't know how to use it sensibly or safely. But sometimes, little ones (and grownups, too, sometimes!) won't figure that out until they're allowed to try, even if it's too soon and they'll only get in trouble. Sometimes adults have to be willing to judiciously allow a child to get in trouble or make a mess, and to be there for the child to explain (and to comfort) when things go wrong.

By whining at and cajoling his elders, Baby Rattlesnake seems to get what he's asking for—but he has a lesson to learn, and the adults know it. Oftentimes, all children know is that they want something—they don't necessarily know what they really want it for, or how to use it once they have it.

2. Outline

A. Wanting and Asking

1. Baby Rattlesnake wants a rattle.
2. Asks for it (mother-father-grandmother-grandfather)
3. Everyone says no.

B. Pivot: Pestering; Adults give it to him

1. Entire community confers about what to do about Baby Rattlesnake.
2. “He'll only get in trouble; but maybe he will learn something. And at least we'll have some peace.”

C. Using the Rattle

1. Baby Rattlesnake scares Rabbit and Tortoise.
2. Tries to scare Chief's Daughter.

D. Crisis: Rattle smashed

1. Chief's Daughter not afraid of him: smashes rattle.
 2. Baby Rattlesnake runs crying to family
- E. Coda: Grandfather
1. "Don't ask for something until you know how to behave!"

3. Timeline

ask for rattle | pester; get | abuse rattle | smashed | "know how to behave!"