

Pinching the Giants: *Tricksters of the World*

Tricksters are as common to cultural folklore as spices are to cuisine. Just as with food, you'll discover that the staples of each trickster tale are similar, and it is often the seasoning that makes the specific offering unique. Tricksters are almost always small, discernibly powerless animals or people, who use their wits, guile, and instincts to survive and thrive in a world ruled by the strong, powerful, and often ruthless. The trickster is the master of manipulation: using flattery, promises of wealth and fame, and an exaggerated sense of their own fear and weakness to obtain a desired outcome. The trickster wins food, fortune, and sometimes immortality, and we always smile. We smile, especially if we are children, because the trickster represents our own unbridled desires. Though power, strength, or wealth might not be in your providence, a strong set of wits can be developed and used by anyone. We can all be the trickster in our own tale. What better character for a child to relate to?

“But wait,” I hear you cry, “this trickster character is amoral! I don't want children identifying with him!” OK, the trickster is often amoral. He/she survives at almost any cost. If you look closely enough, though, those who are truly good are never the ones sacrificed or used by the trickster. The power hungry, the vain, the high and mighty; those who should know better are the trickster's prey, and in this an additional lesson is learned. Rather than thinking that your birth determines your future, the trickster makes his/her own future. So too can your students if, like a trickster, they use the organ that grows between their ears. These tales exist in every part of this wide world, and that should tell you something about the powerful resonance of their message.

Unfortunately, the first of this two-show series has been lost to posterity. The first story, *Dilino and the Dragon*, is a Czech tale about a clever gypsy who uses his wits, or rozum, to make a dragon believe that he is stronger than the beast. *Tales From Knockmany* features Ireland's most famous giant and his better half. With wit and finesse Fin M'Coul's sweet wife Oonogh saves him from the biggest and meanest of old Ireland's giants. Both stories can be found in popular collections of folklore. The third tale can be found in the 3rd installment of 'Kids Who Save the Day.' *Zordack the Hero of Marblehead* is a contemporary tale about a modern trickster who uses his wits to save his town. Finally *The Fly*, a Vietnamese story in Show 2, is also a trickster tale in which a peasant boy protects his family from a greedy landlord by the use of his wits.

Show II begins with pictures and retellings of new stories that students created and sent in response to show 1. They are both compelling and hysterical. The story of a bully whose name is Bully and a cognitively challenged giant called Duh will have you laughing, but there is more than humor in these tales. These children have embraced the concept of the trickster and reinvented him in their own words. As you watch, remind your students that they can do this as well.

Story 1–Molly Whoopie

This tale from Scotland echoes the structure of *Jack and the Beanstalk* so closely that you will be sure the two are related. Molly, who has a bit more chutzpah and better verbal skills, could be Jack’s slightly smarter twin sister! There will be a few words in the story that your students are not familiar with. I have consciously kept them as part of the tale. Too many adaptations of stories completely water down the unique cultural variables that a story offers in the name of ‘understanding.’ If a story engages a child’s heart and imagination, they will reach for these words and enlarge both their vocabulary and their cultural awareness.

CURRICULUM EXTENSIONS:

Vocabulary:

Words that emerge from experience are better understood and remembered than ones that sit lifelessly in spelling lists. Following are the three words in the tale that are probably new to your students’ vocabulary. After they hear the story, remind them of each word and where it was in the tale, and ask them to come up with definitions. You will probably discover that context is a more efficient teacher than lists and definitions.

Treacle: a medicinal drink

Scabbard: a sheath for holding a sword

Cudgel: a short, thick stick used as a weapon

Conceptual Understanding:

What is a trickster? Molly (the small, overtly powerless, youngest sister) was the trickster in the story. Can the students recall the tricks she played? Which of these things were ‘tricks’ and which were simply solid thinking, speed, or courage at work?

- Talking the giant’s wife into taking them into her house
- Switching the necklaces of gold for those of straw
- Getting the King to marry his sons to her sisters
- Getting the sword from above the giant’s bed
- Getting away from the giant over the Bridge of The One Hair
- Getting the giant’s gold coins
- Tricking the giant into putting her in a bag and leaving his home
- Tricking the giant’s wife into the bag
- Marrying the king’s youngest son

Creative Writing:

If you had to steal the sword, the coins, and the ring from a giant, how would you do it?

Kindergarten – Grade 2: Draw a story board of your adventure

Grades 2 – 3: Create illustrations and write the key words of the story beneath each picture. Share stories and illustrations in groups of two.

Grades 4 – 6: Rewrite the story with yourself as the hero or heroine and your solutions to the various problems.

Imagination and Learning Modalities:

Imagination is an important part of learning. Without our imaginations, how could we solve problems that have yet to appear? Without imagination, how can we envision a better life for our peers, our community, and ourselves? Unfortunately the relentless testing that has become part of the US educational system has no time, ability, or desire to measure this all-important skill. It is up to us, seditious parents and educators, to nurture it and thus, to nurture the future.

Ask children to create the world of Molly Whoopie: the Forest of the Giants, the Bridge of the One Hair, and the Land of the Kings. This is a wonderful opportunity to consider Howard Gardner's model of multiple intelligences and observe more about how your students learn. Offer them modalities to express the world of Mollie Whoopie via various intelligences:

- You can describe the world of Mollie Whoopie with words, and tell us about her world. (*Linguistic Intelligence*)
- You can draw, tell, or make a grid of the world, showing us the size differences between the Forest of the Giants and the Land of the Kings. (*Logical/Mathematical Intelligence*)
- You can draw or create a sculpting (shoe box or clay or whatever materials are available) of Molly's world. (*Visual/Spacial Intelligence*)
- You can create a movement sequence that demonstrates the two worlds. I choose to avoid the word 'dance' because it holds such a negative resonance for many boys. (*Kinesthetic Intelligence*)
- You can create a song or rap or rhythm sequence describing the world of Molly Whoopie. (*Musical Intelligence*)
- You can create a map of the plant and animal habitats for the world of Molly Whoopie. (*Nature/Sensing Intelligence*)
- You can give the children the opportunity to share their work with a large group. (*Interpersonal Intelligence*)

There are other intelligences, but this list is a good starting point. You might offer any 2 or 3 modalities for them to explore, and the one they choose will offer you a window onto the way each child learns.

Cognitive Development—Sequencing and Recall (*Preschool – Grade 2*):

Ask children to draw a picture of an image from any one point in the story. As a class, order the pictures on the board (use tape or tacks) in the order they need to appear to represent the story. Invite one or two children to retell the story from the pictures.*

(Be sure to acknowledge each child's individual vision. These pictures can give you a good sense of their listening skills, their imagination, and of any personal experiences or issues that might have been reignited by this tale.)

Social/Emotional Development:

Preschool – Grade 2: Like Hansel and Gretel these girls we abandoned to the woods because their family had no food left to give them. Don't we all wish this was an issue long left in another era? Unfortunately it is not. If this is not an issue for a child listening to this tale, this detail will fly right over them. If it is an issue, you will see it in the way the child listens and hears this part of the story. Don't be afraid to tell these stories. Note the children who are deeply engaged by this aspect of the tale. If time allows ask them questions about their home, food, safety, and other issues in a non judgmental, conversational way. If the child will not talk with you, ask them to draw their house. Ask them who lives there? Where the kitchen is? What's in it? If you sense there is a real problem and you have the social service resources, refer them to these.

Grades 3 – 6: Empathy is a quality that deepens our living. Invite your students to talk about hunger. Depending upon their ages you might:

- Invite them to bring one nonperishable food item from their home to be donated to a local food pantry
- Invite someone from a local hunger organization/food pantry to come and talk with them about hunger.
- Explore why hunger is a growing rather decreasing issue and invite them to develop ideas and projects that can address this growing need.

Story 2–Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby

This might well be the most well known of the Brer Rabbit tales, but the rabbit has traveled far and wide and appears as a trickster in tales from multiple cultural origins. The rabbit has caused havoc in Africa, Cambodia, North America, the Caribbean, and many other lands. Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908) and his wife were two of the first to record written versions of what they titled the "Uncle Remus" tales. They retold them in the thick southern dialect they imagined to be used by black slaves. There is both wisdom and a deep humor to these tales. Contemporary writers have often reinterpreted these stories for modern audiences. My favorite retelling is Julius Lester's *Tales and More Tales of Uncle Remus*.

CURRICULUM EXTENSIONS:

Cognitive Development (Sequencing and Recall):

Same exercise as above.

Character and Vocabulary Development:

Try the exercises described in this article: *Human Sculptures: Story Through Motion*, available on my website, www.storiesalive.com under the articles tab.

Geography and History:

Map how Rabbit came out of Africa, through the Caribbean, to the American south. Map how rum from the Caribbean was purchased in New England, taken to Africa, and traded for human chattel. The slaves were then imprisoned in the hold of slave ships and brought through the Caribbean islands to the American south, where they worked to produce the molasses that was turned into rum. Can you understand why this process was called the ‘triangle trade?’ If you choose to take it, this is a good doorway into slavery, an institution that has shaped racial and regional relationships throughout the history of the United States.

Literature and Writing:

Go to your library and find some other rabbit tales from African, Caribbean, or North American native cultures. Make a chart of Rabbit’s characteristics and the tricks he plays in each story. Look for the similarities and differences. The characteristics shared among all cultures are those that we share as a human race. What is unique will tell you about each specific culture of origin. Can your students write an original rabbit tale? (The younger they are the more structure they will need.)

Kindergarten – Grade 1: Give them a storyboard with the blocks filled in with scenes representing a rabbit tale. Ask them to make up a story based on the sequence of pictures. You can write the story down for them.

Grades 2 – 3: Ask the students to create a storyboard. Give them an opening and ending sentence. Have them create pictures of the story that move from the open prompt to the end you provided. They can then share them orally or write them down.

Grades 4 – 6: Ask students to create a story in which Rabbit tricks someone high and mighty in their world. Offer them various modalities in which to share it: making a picture book, telling the story verbally, writing the story, or acting out the story in small groups.

The possibilities of using these stories to extend your ongoing curriculum objectives are endless. Please share the new ones that you devise or to offer feed back:

jb@storiesalive.com

*** link to Curriculum Guides Empowering Children to Tell**