

diversions



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Tell Me a Story

Storytelling Provides a Means of Transmitting Culture, History

By DIANA CUNNINGHAM
Staff Writer

In Germany it is said that "Handsome words do not butter the cabbage." Popular Chinese folk wisdom affirms that "Talk does not cook the rice." In the United States, culinary references aside, "talk is cheap." But these proverbs may be underestimating the significance of words, and stories in particular, in society.

"Stories from across the world deal with the core of what it means to be human," said Professor Glenn Hinson, chairman of the UNC curriculum in folklore.

People tell stories to give a moral to the listeners, to observe a phenomenon and to deal with the unknown, Hinson said. Folk narrative provides a way of communicating from generation to generation.

And storytelling and folk narrative have a special importance in Southern history.

"The artfully crafted word is part of the rich heritage of the South," Hinson said. According to Hinson, there is a respect in the South for eloquent speech and well-told stories.

It's therefore no surprise that the capital of the storytelling world is located deep in the South. Jonesboro, Tenn., is a mecca of folk stories, modern stories, children's stories and every kind of story. People from all over have gathered there since 1973 for an annual October festival to listen to and tell stories.

Listening to stories is different from

reading literature or the passive entertainment of television, said Professor Brian Sturm, who teaches a performance class on storytelling at UNC. He explained that "oral stories are actually picture based."

Storytellers involve the listeners' imaginations and capture them emotionally by talking about the scenes that form a story.

"Stories are more than plot," Sturm said. "The plot is a coat hanger for the emotions of a story."

North Carolina in particular has a history of storytelling. The Appalachian Jack Tales, including the classic "Jack and the Bean Stalk," have endured and spread into modern culture, said Charles Zug, professor of English and folklore at UNC.

"The Jack Tale traditions are very famous but very few people tell them," Zug said.

According to Zug, immigrants from Europe brought the Jack Tales to the Appalachians and retold them to fit their new lifestyles. They are still told in the original form by a select and dedicated group.

Orville Hicks, a resident of Boone, is renowned for his ability in telling the Jack Tales. "He is the Hemingway of folk narrative," Zug said.

The Appalachian Jack stories served to instruct youthful mountain dwellers with morals of kindness and hard work.

"All stories have a purpose," Zug said. Stories develop from the needs and enthusiasms of a society. "They might have

a moral, like no matter how big you are there is someone bigger, or be kind to strangers," said Sturm.

All stories are reflections of a particular culture, and oral traditions have been a part of human societies since ancient history - from the 1001 Arabian Nights tale to the Odyssey. The Grimm Brothers first recorded folk narrative in their collection of fairy tales in the 1800s, preserving them in their original context. But the stories of modern culture have evolved to fit the times.

The urban legend, the anecdote and the well-told joke require shorter attention spans than stories.

This is consistent with the fast pace of communication and transportation in modern society, Zug said. "People don't have the patience to listen to an entire fairy tale anymore."

People all tell stories every day, almost unthinkingly. But the well-trained storyteller brings the art alive.

"There is a dynamic between listeners and teller of trust and vulnerability that breaks down boundaries," Sturm said.

Sturm has theorized from his own experience as a storyteller at schools and libraries that the "entrancing power" of stories can actually be measured. He plans to use the new MRI scanning equipment at UNC to monitor brain waves and prove a changed state in listeners.

Professional storytellers use facial expression, gesture, tone and movement to

deliberately capture the audience. If Sturm's theory is correct, the semi-hypnotic state that these techniques create make listeners highly suggestible.

This "entrancing power" gives storytellers a certain amount of power that may have been previously overlooked as the technological advances of the 20th century overshadowed traditional storytelling with other forms of entertainment.

Storytelling has only recently made a comeback.

"The last 20 years have seen a renaissance of the art of storytelling," Sturm said. It is now possible to make a living as a professional storyteller, making the art a

career instead of a hobby.

Folklore, and storytelling with it, have become more valid in the academic world as well. It is possible to get a degree in folklore at UNC and many other universities.

The N.C. Arts Council presents its Heritage Preservation Awards to storytellers along with other traditional artists.

According to Hinson, stories are a natural reflection of society: "The essential human conflicts - rites of passage, fear of the unseen - these things invite drama and stories."

The Arts & Entertainment Editor can be reached at artsdesk@unc.edu.

Storytelling in North Carolina

April 29 **Five Faiths Project**

April 27-29 **Mt. Echoes Storytelling Festival**

June 1-3 **NCSG Annual Storytelling Retreat**

June 1 **Festival Wilmington's Third Annual Storytelling Festival**

The Ackland Art Museum presents a program of Buddhist stories.

University of North Carolina at Asheville
For more information, call: 1 (800) 626-5356

Wildacres Retreat Center
Little Switzerland, N.C.
For more information, call: (336) 643-7523

Greenfield Park Amphitheater
Wilmington, N.C.
For more information, call: (910) 341-7855

Local Storyteller Makes a Living Out of Building Community

By ASHLEY ATKINSON
Arts & Entertainment Editor

"I'm not saying that storytelling all by itself is going to change the world," said local storyteller Louise Omoto Kessel.

But when it comes to binding cultures and communities together, or helping individuals heal, storytelling comes close.

"I think when people are going through a difficult experience, the opportunity to tell their story is part of the healing process," said Kessel, who has used storytelling at domestic violence centers and cancer support groups. "It's the opportunity to use mythic imagery to rework those experiences, and kind of transform an injury into learning or into a point of empowerment."

During an April Fool's Day performance at the Skylight Exchange, Kessel spun tales while a mime in red long underwear pretended to be a chicken - set to tunes played by a man in a frog-shaped hat.

While this silliness was intended to entertain children, all in attendance from ages 3 to 83 were obviously enthralled.

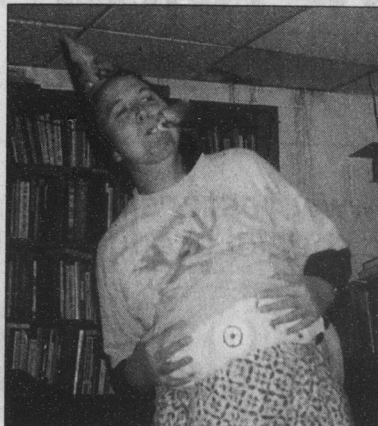
And Kessel doesn't see stories as something only children can enjoy. "I don't know where that idea got started, because I don't see it as ever having been true," she said. "Traditionally, storytelling has been done for adult audiences. Something like 'The Odyssey' - that was told out loud. That's not children's stuff."

"Adults love storytelling. Children love storytelling, too. I love telling stories for the whole age spectrum." Half of

her work is with adults, she said.

Kessel makes her living as a full-time storyteller - "It's my livelihood," she said. She started telling stories as a volunteer while at Goddard College in Vermont.

"I just wanted to do something to be involved in the community instead of being on campus. I really loved it a lot and it snowballed," she said.



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Although her career in storytelling "just kind of fell into place," the art is more than a form of entertainment for Kessel.

"There are a lot of things I love about storytelling, and I wanted to do something I love for my work," she said. "It builds community and brings people together. It's a way I can explore ideas and values that are important to me without giving a big lecture. It's kind of

a nice, openhanded way to share ideas."

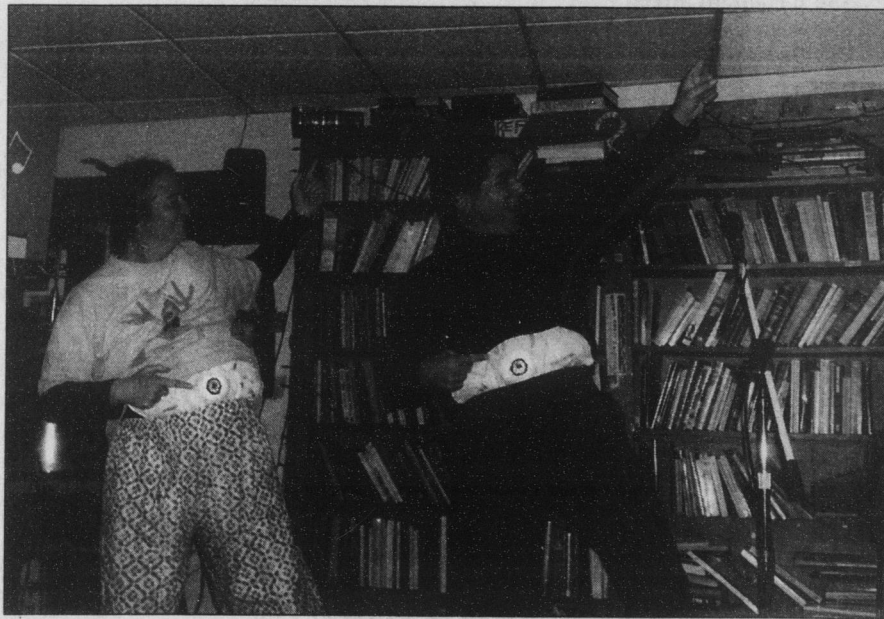
Kessel has been telling stories full-time since 1981. The revival in storytelling that is now in full swing was just getting started at that time, she said.

With or without a revival in popularity, Kessel believes that storytelling has an important place in human activity. "Though it might not be in the same form people used 100 years ago, 500 years ago, it's kind of an innate human thing to do, to tell a story. And people tell stories all the time. In that sense there's a continuity," she said.

"In the sense of professionalization of storytelling, and people coming out to hear stories as a formal thing instead of on their back porches or in their communities, there are many more people involved now than then. There are a lot more opportunities."

Kessel, who has a Japanese- and Russian-American background, employs her culturally diverse heritage in her storytelling. "I have stories that draw from both sides of my family background, and more and more I'm asked to present stories in that context," she said. "I enjoy doing that." Kessel will present Japanese Buddhist stories as part of the Ackland Art Museum's Five Faiths project April 29.

While it might seem that faith plays a large role in storytelling, Kessel maintains that it's the other way around. "I think storytelling plays a big role in faith," she said. "All of the religious traditions have storytelling as part of their heritage, sacred stories and teaching stories in a religious context. "Those are some of my favorite sto-



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Louise Omoto Kessel and mime Jef dance to a song about bellybuttons as part of a storytelling performance for children at the Skylight Exchange on April 1. Kessel has been telling stories professionally for 20 years.

ries - they're really about what you believe and what you value."

Kessel rarely makes up her stories from scratch, "but sometimes they drift pretty far from the source," she said.

Although she gets a lot of her material from written sources, oral and written stories are "almost two different mediums, like sculpture and painting," Kessel said.

"Oral language is so much different from written language. There's eye contact, and facial movement and the sound of your voice. It's really complex and rich just to say a single sentence when you're live in a room with someone. It's almost hard to compare them in a way."

When Kessel finds a story in a book, "There's a whole translation process

where it changes into an oral story," she said. "There's a process of lifting it out of text and into the body." Kessel performs traditional stories as well as those from contemporary authors.

And if you ask five different storytellers what makes a good story, you get five different answers, she said.

"All of us are motivated by a lot of different things. I like storytellers that speak direct from the heart and really care about what they're saying as far as the content of the story, the message in it."

Kessel doesn't make a large distinction between professional storytellers and back-porch yarn-spinners. She'd even rather hear storytellers in the community than go to a festival, she said.

"It's very heartfelt, and it's exciting to

watch people be culture bearers for their own communities," she said.

While Kessel used to spend half her time on the road, she's stopped traveling in the last five years and put her focus on telling stories in this area.

"The wonderful thing about community storytellers is that they have an ongoing relationship with their audience so they have the opportunity to find the story that that audience needs at that time," she said.

"And once they've told the story, it becomes part of the language of that community. It becomes a common reference point for everyone."

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