DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 165 176 CS 204 653

AUTHOR	Crabbe, Katharyn F.
TITLE	Folktales for Children: Literature or Lore?
PUB DATE	Sep 78
NOTE	9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the New York State English Council (28th, Rochester, New York, September 21-23, 1978) ; Best copy available
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Childrens Books; *Childrens Literature; Cultural Background; Elementary Education; Ethnic Origins; Ethnology; *Folk Culture; *Folklore Books; Legends; Story Telling; *Translation

ABSTRACT

In addition to the documentation, annotation, and provision of contextual information that the authentic translation of folklore materials demands, folk stories that are intended for children should reflect the basic mythic patterns of good literature in their translated structure. The aims in translating such stories for children are to recreate the original with a respect for its cultural context, provide background information that explains motivation and behavior, construct a dramatic context for the nonverbal communication on both sides of an issue, organize the tale so that it progresses naturally and with credibility and authority, and make the story vital without compromising its vision of how the world works. (MAI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Katharyn F. Crabbe
English Department
State University College
Brockport, N. Y. 14420

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Katharyn F. Crabbe

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

ED165176

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Folktales for Children: Literature or Lore?

Katharyn F. Crabbe

In a recent issue of Top of the News, Victoria Middleswarth made a reasoned appeal for authenticity in folklore books for children, and she proposed a set of guidelines for discriminating between folklore and fakelore, as the inauthentic brother has come to be called. Essentially, she argues that books of folklore should contain documentation, annotation, and contextual information.[1] I am sympathetic to Middleswarth's view, especially because of the widespread practice of using folklore materials to teach children about other cultures. In her concern for the less studied forms of folklore, however, Middleswarth said little about oral literature. In this essay I would like to explore the application of her guidelines to the particular case of the traditional or folk-tale which is as often a part of a child's literary experience as a part of his instruction in social studies.

If we are to consider what we want from folklore as literature for children rather than as ethnology, we will do well to begin by considering what we want from children's literature in general. Borrowing a phrase from Northrop Frye, what I want from children's literature is an "educated imagination,"[2] and an important part of that educated imagination, especially where the very young are concerned, is a strong sense of structure in works of literature. Thus I want stories and books for children that mirror the basic mythic patterns of literature, patterns we may think of as

CS204653

the primary colors of genre. I want the child reader to meet these strong structures often enough and in powerful enough incarnations that he will grow to feel them as part of the literariness of literature.

It is true that folktales, as they are told in their original settings, are not highly structured in our terms and that many of the most highly structured folktales for children are really examples of fakelore. Writers often seem to have a Pavlovian response to folk art, only in the writers' cases the flowing juices are creative rather than disgestive. When that happens we get books like Jaime de Angula's Indian Tales. Though the book was inspired by de Angula's ethnological work with California Indians, he wrote in the preface:

> I wrote these stories several years ago, for my children, when they were little. Some of them I invented out of my own head. Some of them I remembered--at least, parts, which I wove in and out. Some parts I actually translated almost word for word from my texts. I have not paid very much attention to scientific accuracy. I have mixed tribes that don't belong together. I have made some people live in a type of house that belonged to a different section of the country . . . . So don't worry about it.[3]

I won't worry about it, but I won't call it folklore either, because what Jaime de Angula has produced is really just a work of fiction in which the atmosphere of Indian-ness is strong but the information is untrustworthy. Furthermore, I won't worry about it because books of this type are easy enough to identify. They rarely cite their sources or acknowledge the importance of any ethnological research (indeed, to one's own fiction such research may have little relevance), and they usually note that it is the function of the storyteller to make new art out of old themes, characters, and motifs.

Fakelore aside, renderings of folktales by editors, retellers, or adaptors are essentially translations; they are efforts to make the imaginative constructs of one culture seem at home in and accessible to another. And according to Jorge Luis Borges, there are two ways to do a translation: "One way is to attempt a literal translation; the other is to try a re-creation."[4] If I understand Middleswarth correctly, she is asking us to lean toward the literal in the name of authenticity; however, if we have commitments to both folklore and the educated imagination, I think we cannot do that, for as Edward Fenton wrote in Horn Book, "a literary translation is only truly successful if it has the qualities of credibility, of inevitability, of authority. It has to give the impression of having been written originally in the language of the reader."[5] And that is the impression a literal translation almost never gives.

In addition, the differences between the experience of oral art and the experience of written art are so great that in some ways a literal translation may be as much a falsification as a piece of fakelore, though not because it is inauthentic. Rather, as the Watergate years taught us, literal transcriptions of tapes are nearly incomprehensible even without the added problems of translating from one language and culture to another. But more of that in a moment. For now let us simply say that if he is to be sucessful the redactor of folktales for children must be more than a mere translator; he must be an ethnologist, a dramatist, and an artist in words.

As an ethnologist, the redactor needs to know, acknowledge, and document the relevant sources. And he needs to know and respect the cultural context of the stories he is to tell. That is, in order to reflect accurately the world view implicit in the tales he will tell, he needs to know the culture from which they come, and he needs to know it well. He needs a knowledge of sufficient depth to allow him to understand and to come to come to terms with every nuance of the tale as it has been traditionally told. Theodora Kroeber exhibits this depth of knowledge in her collection of California Indian tales, The Inland Whale, as does Christie Harris in her Northwest Coast tales, Once Upon a Totem.

Such knowledge may lead to an author's leaving out episodes which cannot be made meaningful to the child or which cannot be woven into the main thread of the story. Kroeber refers, for example, to the taste of "/t/he Mohave. . . /for/ a lengthy and elaborated narrative form, told for people who know well their considerable territory and who never tire of description of an infinity of exactly located geographical points of reference for the wanderings, wars, and amorous adventures of their heroes."[6]

Or such knowledge may lead to giving the child enough background information to let him understand motivation and behavior. He may need to know, for example, that among some tribes of the Northwest Coast there was a women's language, spoken by women and small children, and a men's language, spoken only by men and older boys. Or he may need to know something of the cultural cosmology. Christie Harris provides just that sort of information for her readers in her version of "Raven Traveling." In one of her sources, Swanton's Haida Texts, "Raven Traveling" begins this way:

> Over this island salt water extended, they say. Raven flew about. He looked for a place upon which to sit. After awhile he flew away to sit upon a flat rock which lay toward the south end of the island.[7]

But Harris's version for children begins,

> Once in the days of very long ago, the trickiest of all tricksters roamed the Northwest Coast, playing pranks on everybody. And people couldn't protect themselves from his pranks because they never knew it was Raven they were dealing with until after he had done the mischief.
>
> Being supernatural, he could transform himself into whatever it suited him to be at the moment. He could appear to people as a handsome young chief, or as a bird, or as an ordinary everyday truth-telling traveler.[8]

Here, as in Once Upon a Totem, Harris has provided a familiar structure for a story ("Once in the days of very long ago . . ." is a strong structural feature), and she has provided three important bits of information about Raven: he is a trickster, he is supernatural, and he can change shapes. The child who reads Harris's retellings of Haida and Tsimshian myths will have his own growing sense of the shape of literature reinforced while he meets new ways of seeing the world and acquires new information about the world view of the people. He will, that is, hold in his mind both sides of the story, literary and ethnological, as easily and unselfconsciously as the Haida or Tsimshian child held both sides of Raven, the Trickster. Surely this is what it means for a literary artist to provide contextual information.

As a dramatist the redactor must be able to stage in his mind an oral presentation of the tale, because he needs to know and understand the meaning and importance of the non-verbal communication on both sides. More than one student of folk cultures has noted that what happens in a storytelling session is more akin to theatrical than to narrative art.[9] Surely the storyteller will give signals that express his own emotional and intellectual responses to the tale--in his tone of voice, in his posture, in his expressions and gestures-- and just as surely his audience will respond sometimes to the tale and sometimes to his telling. Their responses are important in forming the shape of the story as it goes, so our redactor must be able to consider them as a part of performance variables. The non-verbal aspects of the performance are especially important in preserving tone and style in the children's version. Frederic Guirma solves this problem creatively in his Tales of Mogho by making the first story a story about a storyteller and his telling a tale to a group of children.[10]

Finally, as an artist the redactor must be capable of re-creating the tale so that it seems to have grown naturally. The tale must reflect a wholeness of vision that will give it Fenton's qualities of credibility, inevitability, and authority. This non-negotiable requirement has several implications: It means that documentation and annotation must be unobtrusive, and that contextual information must be integrated into structure and plot. The redactor must, indeed, be true to the world view of the original, but he must also make that world view seem understandable and acceptable, even natural. When Leslie Fiedler rewrites the Japanese tale "Momotaro, the Boy Who Was Born from a Peach Pit" in such a way as to make Momotaro's old parents look in his face and fall down dead when he returns; when he replaces the traditional honor for parents with an American insistence on independence, he is changing the world view of the tale. That may well be good literature, but it's bad folklore. The redactor of folktales must find a way to make the tale live for his own audience without compromising its vision of how thw world works.

To a non-native audience, a translation that does not re-create a folktale may seem pedestrian, unimaginative, in short, boring. We cannot afford to place that kind of book in a children's literature collection. For folktales, as for other kinds of folklore, demand documentation, annotation,

NOTES

[1] Victoria Middleswarth, "Folklore Books for Children: Guidelines for Selection," Top of the News, 34 (1978), 348-352.

[2] Northrop Frye, The Educated Imagination (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1964).

[3] Jaime de Angula, Indian Tales (New York: Hill and Wang, 1953), p. 5.

[4] Quoted in Maria Polushkin, "A Few Words on Translation," in Paul Heins, ed., Crosscurrents of Criticism (Boston: Horn Book, 1977), p. 283.

[5] Edward Fenton, "Blind Idiot: The Problems of Translation," in Crosscurrents of Criticism, p. 305.

[6] The Inland Whale (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1959), p. 153.

[7] John Swanton, Haida Texts and Myths (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1905).

[8] Christie Harris, Once More Upon a Totem (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 67.

[9] For a good example, see Melville Jacobs, The Content and Style of an Oral Literature (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1959).

[10] Tales of Mogho (New York: Macmillan, 1971).