



Storytelling Series

World Tales for Family Storytelling

53 Traditional Stories
for Children
aged 4–6 years

Chris Smith

Foreword by Jamila Gavin



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Contents

Foreword by Jamila Gavin	vii
Introduction	xi

Stories

1.	Monkeys and Hats India	1
2.	The Little Red Hen England	4
3.	Three Little Pigs England	6
4.	The Birth of Jesus World (Christian)	8
5.	The Gingerbread Man England	10
6.	Bats Learns to Dance Origin unknown	12
7.	Three Billy Goats Gruff Norway	14
8.	The Noisy House Britain	16
9.	The Giant Turnip Russia	19
10.	The Wooden Baby Czech Republic	22
11.	Goldilocks and the Three Bears Britain	25
12.	The Fox's Sack England	29
13.	The Princess and the Pea Denmark	34
14.	Skinny Old Lady Africa	36
15.	The Freedom Bird Thailand	40
16.	Snip-Snip European (Jewish)	44
17.	The King and the Moon Dominican Republic	48
18.	The Magic Porridge Pot Germany	51

19.	<i>The Sweet-Talking Potato</i>	Africa	54
20.	<i>Stone Soup</i>	Switzerland	56
21.	<i>A Husband for Miss Mouse</i>	Myanmar	58
22.	<i>Awongalema</i>	Africa	62
23.	<i>The Lion's Roar</i>	India (Buddhist)	64
24.	<i>Goose Girl's Wings</i>	China	67
25.	<i>Mouse and Lion</i>	Greece	70
26.	<i>The Nest and the Web</i>	(Islam)	72
27.	<i>The Dancing Harmonica</i>	USA	74
28.	<i>The Talkative Turtle</i>	Native American	77
29.	<i>Bandits and Berries</i>	China	79
30.	<i>The Thirsty Frog</i>	Aboriginal Australia	82
31.	<i>More!</i>	USA	85
32.	<i>Little Red Riding Hood</i>	France	87
33.	<i>Jack and the Beanstalk</i>	Britain	90
34.	<i>The Stonecutter</i>	China	94
35.	<i>The Unlucky Man</i>	England	98
36.	<i>The King and the Cockerel</i>	Iraq	102
37.	<i>The Bird and the Forest Fire</i>	India (Buddhist)	107
38.	<i>Honey and Trouble</i>	Africa	109
39.	<i>How Coyote Brought Fire to Earth</i>	Native American	113
40.	<i>The Snake and the Frog</i>	USA	117

41.	<i>The Talking Skull</i>	Africa	119
42.	<i>The Elephant's Fury</i>	Asia (Buddhist).	121
43.	<i>The Island of Fairies</i>	Scotland.	125
44.	<i>The Bee's Treasure</i>	Japan	127
45.	<i>The Pied Piper of Hamlyn</i>	Germany	131
46.	<i>The Pedlar of Swaffham</i>	England.	134
47.	<i>Strength</i>	Africa.	136
48.	<i>Sleeping Beauty</i>	Germany	140
49.	<i>Rumpelstiltskin</i>	Germany	142
50.	<i>Cinderella</i>	Germany	147
51.	<i>The Magic Paintbrush</i>	China	154
52.	<i>Snow White</i>	Germany.	157
53.	<i>The Two Dragons</i>	Wales.	162
	Sources and Resources		165
	Acknowledgements		197
	About the Author		198

Foreword

When I was a young child in a small town in India, there were no bookshops or libraries – especially not for children. So my mother, a passionate reader, used to enthrall me by telling me what her books were about on our daily walks, whether they were novels by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, or crime fiction by Agatha Christie. In this way, I knew many fairytales and literary classics long before I could read and had books of my own.

But maybe most precious of all was the bedtime story from my mother or father. The winding down of a day; being taken to the brink of sleep by just the right story for me. This is the time when the travails of the day can be smoothed out; when parents become storytellers, when they find themselves making up stories to suit their child. Family stories are passed on and added to, creating generational continuity and, importantly, the passing on of their own values.

This is the joy of *World Tales*, so carefully collected by Chris Smith, and honed down to perfect gems of storytelling. Simple and memorable, they are an encouragement to all of us to become storytellers.

My mother's storytelling turned me into a storyteller from a young age. On sea voyages between India and England I invariably got a crowd of children round me in some corner on deck, and told them stories – either ones I'd made up, or others passed on to me. In my aunt's house in England, there was a curtained four-poster bed, and my cousins and I used to huddle under the quilt together, and frighten each other by telling scary ghost stories.

With my Indian background, I became aware of the storytelling tradition. Every major Hindu festival was marked by clusters around storytellers on the street, sitting under a tree, or invited into a garden to share the great epics from the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*. We all knew the stories, so we could interject or add, or know when to clap, or sigh, or weep, or exclaim. I am certain this public

knowledge of well-known stories is built into Homer's telling of the *Odyssey* or any of the great sagas of the world. They even contain repeated phrases that everyone knew and could join in with, or at least anticipate: Athena was 'grey-eyed', Odysseus was 'cunning', and they sailed on the 'wine dark sea'.

The stories known as *Aesop's Tales* reputedly travelled all the way to Greece from India and it isn't difficult to identify the common themes along the routes. When talking about stories in school, I like to have a map of the world to show the trade routes: the Spice Route or the Silk Road, that enabled stories to travel – from China to France, or India to Greece, and of course later, Europe to America.

Although words were being committed to stone, clay, papyrus and ceramics, it wasn't until the invention of the printing press that books came to be commonly available. Until then, it was all word of mouth and storytelling via the three Rs: rhythm, rhyme, and repetition. But sadly, and gladly, the printing press set stories in stone, and the possibility to adjust, qualify and embroider, in whichever way one wanted in any given culture or scenario, was lessened and sometimes lost.

I believe passionately in the value of storytelling. Firstly, it puts you in charge of how to convey the story; and secondly, there is much value in group storytelling, with everyone contributing. It is a way of instilling confidence in the most timid of people, and a great way to learn the core stories which permeate not just our culture, but the cultures of the world. They are a way of unifying us: the myths, legends and fairy tales are truly international. Authorship is lost in the mists of time, passing down from one generation to another by word of mouth. The storyteller can adapt to the age, nature, and ethnicity of the audience, and make choices about which element of the story they want to emphasize: jealousy, rivalry, love, loyalty, ambition. All of those, by the way, are in Cinderella. That's why there are versions of this in almost every country in the world, culturally tuned to specific values: Chinese, Finnish, Egyptian, English, German and, of

course, the French with the glass slipper – which is the one most of us know.

To tell a story well, you need to know it, understand it, and steer it, which is precisely what *World Tales* helps you to do. This wonderful collection of 53 stories, from around the world, is a perfect way to restore confidence: nothing too long, or complicated and, most important of all, stories that are short, sharp and unforgettable.

As a writer, I invariably read my story out loud to get the narrative flow, the sense of the listener, and to be sure I was holding their interest. Language has rhythm – and it is rhythm that makes it memorable.

Some storytellers can hold audiences just by their voices, their use of language, or the pace and intensity of their delivery. Others enact the stories by pacing up and down, making facial expressions and physical gestures, and using props like masks, or a musical instrument. It is memorability one is looking for, both as the storyteller and the listener. You want them to go away remembering the story you have told them, and to become storytellers themselves in order to repeat it and pass it on. Remember the three Rs of rhythm, rhyme, and repetition!

Sadly, the power of story, that streams effortlessly through the media and television, has robbed many of the confidence to be storytellers – even to their own children. It appropriates imagination, creativity, and makes them forget the sheer joy of being the main storyteller to their young listeners. Whatever alternatives compete to tell stories: from screens to audiobooks, and professionally recorded storytellers, nothing replaces *you*, and those most intimate of bonds; *your* voice, *your* presence at the bedside; *you and your child*.

Jamila Gavin FRSL, storyteller and author, July 2021.