



Storytelling Series

# **World Tales for Family Storytelling II**

44 Traditional Stories  
for Children  
aged 6–8 years

Chris Smith

Foreword by Georgiana Keable



**Hawthorn Press**

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## 35. The Woman of the Sea

*This is another selkie story from Scotland, where seals turn to women and back again. As well as the magic of the transformation, there are the resonances of separation and reunion in the family: lots of strong feelings to evoke with the divided family.*



One summer evening a young man was walking along a long, wide sandy beach, under a full moon, next to a quiet shining sea. He had been working all day in the fields cutting and binding the hay. Hot and sweaty, he thought to go for a swim. In front of him in the moonlight he heard the sound of strange music and saw a group of women dancing on the beach. He stopped and hid behind a rock as they danced to strange flowing music. It seemed to come from instruments made of shells and seaweed. The women rose and fell together like crashing waves. He had never seen anything so beautiful. Beside the dancers he saw a pile of sealskins, glistening in the moonlight.

‘These must be seal-women,’ he thought. ‘I have heard about them. Sometimes they are seals and sometimes they are human.’

He crept closer and saw that they had no shadows in the bright moonlight. When his own shadow touched the circle they turned as one and stared, like a shoal of startled fish, then rushed for their sealskins, ran into the waves and, slipping on the skins, became seals once more. But one of the seal-women could not find her skin and ran up and down the beach looking for it. The man realised it was next to his feet and, quickly, he picked it up and hid it behind a rock.

‘Come here!’ he said. ‘Let me help you!’

She ran to him, out of breath. ‘I’ve lost my skin! Help me find it!’

‘Alright,’ he said, and walked up and down the beach with her till morning. ‘It’s gone!’ he said. ‘Come home with me instead. Be my wife!’

‘But I cannot come. My family is there in the sea! I cannot leave my children!’

‘Maybe one day you will find your skin,’ he said, ‘but till then, come and live with me. Be my human wife.’

She was frightened and nodded, waving out to the cluster of seals bobbing around in the waves as she walked away.

For seven years she cared for his house – cleaning and cooking and looking after the three young children she gave birth to. The man was happy to have such a beautiful wife. Every evening after work it was a delight to come home. Even if she was always a little sad, she never complained and, after a while, he stopped noticing.

Every evening she’d go down to the sea and stare out over the waves. Sometimes a seal head would appear and call out to her from the waves.

Then she would sing to them:

*Take me home, Mother Sea! Take me home!*

*Take me home, Mother Sea! Take me home!*

*Let me be in the waves of your sweet flowing heart.*

*Take me home, Mother Sea! Take me home!*

In the day, when he was at work, she’d cook and clean, singing that same song to herself as she worked. And in the evening she sang her children to sleep with it in their beds:

*Take me home, Mother Sea! Take me home!...*

Then, one winter day, she was playing hide and seek with her children on the beach when one of them found a dark skin under a rock.

‘Mum, what’s this? It’s so soft and dark!’

She looked at her home. She looked at her children. She looked at the sea. She hugged each child and ran to the water, slipping on her skin. The next moment there was just a seal head bobbing in the waves. The children ran to the waves and called, ‘Mother, come back! Don’t leave us!’ They watched as a group of seals swam to her and then they all disappeared under the waves.

From that day on the home was sad. The children helped to cook and clean and every evening they’d go down to the sea and sing:

*Take me home, Mother Sea! Take me home!...*

One day she came for them, with three small skins, and they were gone, leaving the husband alone with only his memories for the rest of his days. On clear nights he’d go to the beach and wait and hope, but the seal-woman never returned.



## 36. How Jerusalem Began

*I love this version of how Jerusalem began. It is claimed variously by Palestinian, Jewish and Christian communities around the world. You can read another version penned by myself in One City, Two Brothers from Barefoot Books. It's a fable of love, generosity and sacred place. It is quite a tricky tale to tell. Pay attention to the detail of what happens when and make the physical description really clear. Build up suspense in the first half – what is going on?*



Once, on opposite sides of a hill, were two villages. Between the villages was a field where two brothers farmed together. The elder lived in one with his wife and children. The younger lived in the other village. He was single and lived alone.

Every spring the brothers ploughed the land and sowed it with wheat, then watered and weeded till the grain was golden. Then they cut and threshed the crop, pouring the grain into bags and tying up the straw into sheaves of hay for the animals. Every year they divided it all half and half.

One summer they had just divided the harvest, fifteen sacks of grain each, and had carted off the sacks to their own villages. The elder brother thought, 'My little brother needs this grain more than me. When he's old he won't have any children to look after him. I know what I'll do. I'll sneak these extra bags into his grain store tonight and he'll get a surprise in the morning.'

That night the elder brother loaded three sacks onto the top of his donkey, climbed up over the top of the hill and down to his brother's village, and sneaked the bags into his brother's store.



The next morning the elder brother said to his wife, 'We have just twelve sacks to last us for the year. That's one sack every month. That will be plenty!'

'Hmmm...' she said, 'I thought there was more than that?' She went into her husband's store and came back a while later, puzzled. 'Husband, there are fifteen sacks in there, not twelve. You must be tired after all that work!'

He went and counted and sure enough there were fifteen. 'How strange!' he thought. 'I must have dreamt it. I'll give him the bags tonight.'

So that night he loaded up his donkey and walked to his little brother's house, slipped the three sacks in the store and came home.

The next morning he told his wife what he had done, but when she looked into the store she saw there were still fifteen sacks. 'What are you up to?' she asked, 'Is this a trick?' The elder brother was confused now, but was determined to give away the sacks. That evening he set off down the hill for the third time, towards his brother's home.

Two nights earlier the younger brother was just unloading his sacks of grain when he thought, 'My elder brother needs this more than me. He has a family to feed and I'm by myself. I know what I'll do. I'll give him a surprise!' That night he loaded three sacks of grain onto his donkey and led it quietly up and over the hill to his brother's home, slipped the sacks into the store and came home, smiling.

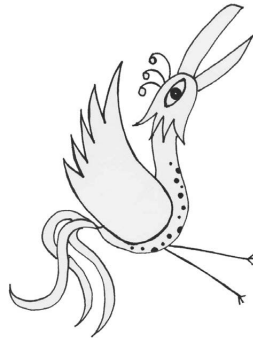
The next day he noticed that there were still fifteen sacks in his store. 'Strange!' he thought. 'I'll give them to him tonight anyway.'

So the next night he led his donkey up and over the hill to his brother's village and put three more sacks into his store. But the next day there was still fifteen sacks in his own grain store.

‘What’s going on?’ he thought. ‘Is this some magic trick, or am I just imagining that I give the sacks away every night? Anyway, third time lucky!’

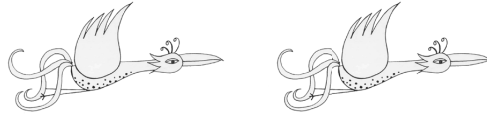
He loaded up his donkey that night with three more sacks and set off up the hillside. As he climbed he saw someone coming towards him, looking just like his own reflection – a man with a donkey and three sacks on top. As the brothers came closer they recognised each other and understood the puzzle of the sacks, and they were filled with joy at the love they had given and received.

That holy spot where the two brothers met is the holy place where the city of Jerusalem began.



## 37. Odysseus and the Cyclops

*Here's another popular monster tale from the Ancient Greeks. It's gritty and gory and great for action drama. Tellers can build on all their knowledge of monsters and heroes from digital sources. It's a delightful mixture of comedy and horror and of course a link into The Odyssey.*



Once there was a war between the city of Troy and the armies of Greece. For ten long years the Greeks laid siege to Troy, which was finally defeated by the Greeks thanks to the cleverness of one of their kings, Odysseus.

When the war was over, Odysseus set off for home sailing from island to island on the way back to Ithaca where his wife waited for him. On one such island, Odysseus had anchored his boat offshore and rowed to the beach with a party of twelve men in order to look around for food. After a while they came to a cave packed full with sheep and goats. Odysseus and his men waited in the cave for the owner of the sheep to arrive so they could offer to buy a few for their journey.

Around nightfall a huge one-eyed giant, Polyphemus, returned to the cave to check on his sheep and immediately smelled the presence of humans inside. 'Who's in there?' he roared. 'Come out and show yourself or, when I catch you, I will stick you on a spit and roast you for supper!'

Nobody came out, and the cave was too small for the giant to get in, but he reached into the cave, grabbed two of the men and ate them, there and then, as the others listened to their screams. Then Polyphemus blocked the entrance to the cave with a huge stone, impossible for the men to move, and went away to sleep.

The next morning he returned, rolled away the stone, reached inside, grabbed two more of the men and devoured them. Then one by one he let the sheep and goats out of the cave, looking closely at each, one by one, to check there were no men trying to escape.

All day Odysseus thought about the situation and came up with a plan. He took a long wooden club of the giant's and sharpened one end to a fine point. Then, when the giant came back for his evening meal, Odysseus offered him some wine. 'It's good,' he said.

'The best wine in Troy. Try it!'

'I will,' said the giant. 'But tell me, what is your name?' 'Nobody,' said Odysseus.

'My name is Nobody.'

'That's a strange name,' said the giant, and started drinking.

Polyphemus drank and soon became sleepy and fell asleep in the entrance to the cave, blocking it. Odysseus and his men carried the club up to his snoring head and plunged it hard into the giant's single eye. Polyphemus screamed and bellowed and tried to find the men who had done it but they scurried back to the corner of the cave out of reach, where the giant could not get them!

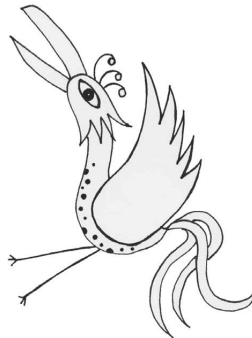
So Polyphemus rolled the stone back over the cave entrance and then ran around the island in a blind drunken rage calling out, 'Nobody has blinded me! Nobody has blinded me!' and all the other giants laughed, thinking he was just being foolish. So no one came to help him.

The next morning the giant came back to the cave, rolled away the stone and started to lead the sheep out one by one. Odysseus and his men had tied themselves to the bellies of the sheep in the cave with their belts. As the sheep were led out the giant felt the coat of each, one by one, to make sure there were no men hiding, but didn't notice the men hanging underneath the sheep.

The men rushed down to their boat and rowed out to the ship. As Odysseus sailed away he shouted out to Polyphemus, ‘You think I am Nobody – but I am somebody. I am Odysseus, the great warrior, remember me!’

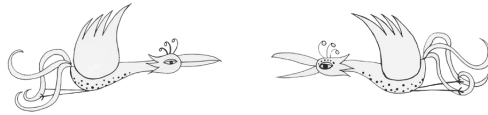
Polyphemus did remember him. He told the story to his father, God of the Sea, Poseidon, who from that day became Odysseus’s enemy, creating storms and trouble for Odysseus on his long journey home.

And that’s how Odysseus escaped from the cave of the one-eyed giant, Polyphemus.



## 38. The Four Dragons

*Here's a Chinese story about how its four main rivers began: the Heilongjiang, the Huang He in central China, the Yangtze, and the Zhujiang. You might show your class a map of China with these four rivers on it as an introduction. Dragons create huge enthusiasms. I like this one because the dragons are helpful and compassionate, as is often the case in that part of the world. It's also a way into discussions about the environment and the importance of water for life.*



Once, long ago, there were no rivers or lakes on the earth. The rain came and watered the land, but then disappeared underground.

In those days there were four great dragons who lived in the eastern sky – the Long Dragon, the Yellow Dragon, the Black Dragon and the Pearl Dragon. They were great friends and would spend their days flying and playing together above the earth. One day they were playing in the sky as usual when they noticed people down on earth praying.

‘Please send us rain! Let the gods send us rain! If not our crops will die and then we will die of hunger. Please send rain to us so our children will have rice to eat!’

The dragons looked down and saw that the earth was as dry as a bone. Nothing could grow in such soil and all the fields were bare and dry. The people were thin and dying. The dragons could see the ribs of the children and their swollen hungry bellies.

‘How poor the people are!’ said the Yellow Dragon. ‘They will die if it doesn’t rain soon.’ The Long Dragon nodded, ‘Let’s go and beg the Emperor for rain.’

The Emperor was chief of the gods. If anyone could help, he could. The dragons flew off to the Heavenly Palace to see the Emperor but he was not pleased to see them.

‘What are you doing here without an invitation?’ he said. ‘Go back to the eastern sky and leave me in peace!’

The Long Dragon stepped forward and said, ‘Please, your majesty, we have seen the sufferings of people on earth. Without rain they will all die. Have pity and send them rain. We come to ask for that.’

‘You go away,’ the Emperor said, ‘and I’ll send some rain down soon.’

The four dragons went happily back. But ten days passed, and not a drop of rain came down. The people suffered more, some eating bark, some grass roots, some forced to eat white clay when they ran out of bark and grass roots. Seeing all this, the four dragons felt very sorry, and realised that the Emperor only cared about pleasure, and never thought about the troubles of the people.

‘So what shall we do?’ said the Long Dragon.

‘We have to do something ourselves. He will never help,’ said the Yellow Dragon.

‘How can we make it rain?’ said the Pearl Dragon.

‘Is there not plenty of water in the sea where we live? We should scoop it up and spray it towards the sky. The water will be like raindrops and come down to save the people and their crops,’ suggested the Black Dragon.

‘Good idea!’ said the others as they clapped their hands.

‘But,’ said the Long Dragon after thinking a bit, ‘we will be blamed if the Emperor learns of this.’

‘I will do anything to save the people,’ the Yellow Dragon said.

‘Then let’s begin. We will never regret it,’ said Long Dragon.

The dragons flew to the sea, scooped up water in their mouths and on their

wings, and then flew back into the sky, where they sprayed the water out over the earth. The four dragons flew back and forth, making the sky dark all around. Before long the sea water became rain pouring down from the sky.

‘It’s raining! It’s raining! The crops will be saved!’ the people cried and leaped with joy.

On the ground the wheat stalks raised their heads and the rice stalks straightened up. The people were happy, but then the Sea God reported what had happened to the Emperor.

‘How dare the four dragons bring rain without my permission!’ he fumed.

The Emperor ordered his armies to arrest the four dragons. Being far outnumbered, the four dragons could not defend themselves, and they were soon arrested and brought back to the Heavenly Palace.

‘Go and get four mountains to lay upon them so that they can never escape!’ the Emperor ordered the Mountain God.

The Mountain God used his magic power to make four mountains fly there, and pressed them down on top of the four dragons. Imprisoned as they were, they did not for one moment regret what they had done. Instead they worked some dragon magic, and turned themselves into four rivers, which flowed from the four high mountains down the mountain valleys, crossing the whole land from the west to the east and finally emptying into the sea.

This is how China’s four great rivers were formed – the Heilongjiang (Black Dragon) in the far north, the Huang He (Yellow River) in central China, the Changjiang (Yangtze, or Long River) farther south, and the Zhujiang (Pearl) in the south.

So when the rain stops for a while, people can take water from the rivers to make their crops grow. All thanks to those four dragons.



## 39. The Land of the Deep Ocean

*Here's another careful-what-you-wish-for story, this time from Japan, which plays with the idea of time being different in different places. Our kind hero travels to a wonderful undersea world and lives happily for a while, until restlessness is his undoing. Try and conjure the wonder and wonderfulness of the other world, and then the growing horror as he returns home to his doom! Hear Rafe Martin tell this one on his Yellow Moon CD.*



Once, on the edge of the great ocean, there was a beach. Next to the beach was a village and in the village was a wooden house. Inside the house there lived a fisherman. He was single, but happy enough and loved spending the evenings with his brothers and sisters and parents, all of whom lived close by in the same village. Every morning he'd row his boat out into the sea, cast his nets, pull them in and sell whatever he caught at the village market. In this way time passed happily.

Then one day he was walking down the beach when he saw a group of children crowded around something, jeering and throwing stones. Coming closer he saw that they had surrounded a huge turtle, which was as long as the fisherman was tall. It was trying to get back to the sea but the children were blocking its way.

The fisherman called out, 'Why do you hurt this innocent creature?'

'Why not?' said their leader. 'There's nothing else to do here.'

'Leave him,' he said. 'Let me give you a few coins and you can go and spend them in the market.'

The children grinned, pocketed the coins and ran off down the beach, while the turtle waddled down to the sea and swam out through the waves. He turned and

stared intently at the fisherman before he dived underwater and was gone.

The next morning the fisherman rowed out into the ocean, dropped his nets and waited. It was a gentle, warm day and he fell asleep in the boat, fell into a deep and lovely dream. He dreamt of a beautiful young woman with eyes as green as seaweed, skin as fair as beach sand and hair as black as a seagull's eye. In the dream she rose up out of the water, walked towards him in his boat and touched him on the shoulder. At that moment he woke up and there she was with him in the boat!

'Who are you?' he asked, astonished.

'I am the daughter of the Sea King who lives in the land of the deep ocean. He was that turtle. You helped him and now he will help you. He has sent me to be your bride. If you wish, you can come home with me to live in the Kingdom of the Deep. Would you like that? But if you come you may never return.'

He nodded. He had never seen anything so beautiful. She leaned over and kissed him softly on the lips and he felt his world explode.

Together they dived into the water and, taking his hand, she swam with him down to the deep ocean, down through a tunnel and up into a vast cave filled with all the creatures of the sea.

'Welcome, Good Man!' the sea creatures called to him. 'Welcome to our kingdom!'

The fisherman and the Sea King's daughter were married and lived happily for a while in the king's palace, playing with the fish and dolphins, swimming out into the deep ocean and exploring the tunnels and caves of the sea bed. The fisherman had never been so full of joy and life.

In this way the years passed and he began to think of his family and friends in the village. He wanted to see them. The more he thought about it the bigger this want became until he could bear it no longer.

‘Let me go back home,’ he said to his wife. ‘Let me see my family again.’

‘I told you there was no way back!’ she said softly.

‘Please! There must be a way. I cannot live here as a prisoner!’

She nodded sadly. ‘If you must go then take this box with you – it will protect you as long as you never open it. But believe me, you’d be happier here.’

It was a tiny black box the size of a matchbox.

They swam up to the surface of the sea and the Sea King’s daughter led the fisherman to the beach by his village, waving sadly goodbye as he clutched the black box in his hand. He was so excited at the thought of seeing his family and friends he rushed up the beach and into the village.

Then he stopped. It all looked very different. ‘I suppose it’s because I’ve been away,’ he thought. He looked up at the mountains behind the house. They were covered with tall thick trees! He remembered the mountains as being bare. He looked at the wall around his village. It was made of stone! He remembered it as being of wood. He went to the place where his own house had stood, but there was nothing there. Just an empty field!

An old man walked by.

‘Excuse me,’ said the fisherman, ‘but what has happened to my house? I used to live here but the house has gone. What has happened?’

The old man shook his head. ‘I’ve lived here all my life and I’ve never seen a house here. You must be lost. What’s your name?’

The fisherman told him, ‘Taro. My name is Urashimo Taro.’ The old man looked at him, puzzled. ‘Is this a joke?’

‘No!’ said the fisherman. ‘That’s my name.’

‘There’s a story here that long ago there was a man by that name who went out to sea and never returned. His family searched for him but only found an empty boat. They say he was taken by a mermaid, but that’s just stories. Anyway, that

was long ago but if you don't believe me you can go to the graveyard. His family are all buried there.'

As if in a dream the fisherman walked to the graveyard on the edge of the village and looked from grave to grave. It was true – there was the gravestone of his father covered in moss and lichen. There was his mother's stone. Also his brothers and sisters and the graves of their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. How was it possible? It was as if he had been away not just for three years but for three hundred years. How could it be?

He walked back to the beach and stared out at the sea. He had no home, no family here. Just the little black box in his hand. Maybe that had the clue.

The fisherman carefully slid open the box and as he did so a white light spiralled up out of the box and away over the ocean.

The next moment he felt tired, then there was pain all over his body. It was hard to breathe. He felt his skin shrivel and his hair turn white. Then his skin and flesh was gone, leaving only white bone. As the skeleton fell to the ground it crumbled into dust mixing with the sand on the beach. There was no trace of the man who had once been... Urashimo Taro.

