

Living Stories of the Cherokee

edited by
Barbara R. Duncan

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 1

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Discussion questions

Native American cultures value tradition and strive to keep the past, the “old ways,” alive in the present. What are your attitudes toward tradition versus progress and change? What connections with the past do you make in your family life? At work? In your spiritual practices? In rearing your children?

Mythologies around the globe use varying stories to explain the sun and moon or to account for animal behaviors and markings. Can biology, physics, and astronomy be considered forms of myth making? Why or why not? What do you have to “take on faith” to believe in creationism? What do you have to “take on faith” to believe in evolution?

Additional readings

John H. Finger. *Cherokee Americans: The Eastern Band of the Cherokees in the Twentieth Century*, 1991.

Diane Glancy. *Pushing the Bear: A Novel of the Trail of Tears*, 1996.

Thomas E. Mails. *The Cherokee People: The Story of the Cherokees from Earliest Origins to Contemporary Times*, 1996.

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"Cherokee culture is alive in the hearts of the Cherokee people," writes Barbara Duncan in her introduction to *Living Stories of the Cherokee*. "It is stronger, richer, bigger, and more enduring than any book that can be written about it. Storytelling is part of Cherokee culture, and it, too, is alive and strong." In compiling this collection of tales, Duncan interviewed Cherokee storytellers and recorded their tales as evidence of the lasting vitality of storytelling traditions among the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

Cultures all over the earth tell stories. The stories are as old as humanity and have been passed from generation to generation during long nights around winter fires. They exist in our modern-day living rooms during holidays and other gatherings, when we participate in family traditions and share family stories in much the same way that the Cherokee storytellers in this book learned their stories from listening to the lore of their tribe.

Even though the stories of the Cherokee may be printed in books, they cannot be attributed to a particular author, nor can they be fixed in time, place, form, or content. They are not the work of an individual imagination; they are folklore, anonymous, always changing, circulating through the hearts, minds, and mouths of countless tellers. In *Living Stories of the Cherokee*, Duncan has included three versions of "How the Possum Lost His Tail" and two versions of "The Origin of Strawberries." Readers might study the similarities and differences between these versions to gain an appreciation for the way in which the tales have evolved and are still evolving.

It is also interesting to note the broad range of tales in this collection. A myth, such as "How the World Was Made," is a creation story, essentially religious in its content, explaining the origin of the earth and its creatures in a manner similar to the book of Genesis. Legends, such as "The Origin of the Pileated Woodpecker" or "The Legend of the Corn Beads," recount deeds or events, often sensational in nature, comparable to "The Legend of Rip Van Winkle" or "The Legend of Johnny Appleseed." With enough embellishment, stories become "tall tales," similar to accounts of Paul Bunyan's superhuman size and strength. In this collection, Davey Arch's story, "Big Snakes," in which Arch's grandfather recounts seeing rattlesnakes the size of fallen logs, might be considered a tall tale.

Tales specific to individuals and families, such as "Jeannie and the Booger" or "The First Time I Saw a White Man," are also included in the collection. These tales become family folklore when they are told in differing versions over a long period of time. "Stories about healing, about supernatural experiences, about grandfathers and grandmothers, about particular places in the mountains," Duncan states in her introduction, "these are all traditional stories just as much as is 'How the Possum Lost His Tail.'"

Sometimes these stories may seem silly or childish. Indeed, they are often told to children. But scholars remind us that folklore can be a powerful influence on the way we see ourselves and interpret the world around us. Robert Bly, for instance, in his best-seller, *Iron John*, examined the wisdom embodied in certain European tales and the value of those tales in guiding the social and psychological maturation of men. Joseph Campbell, the noted folklorist, researched religious mythologies around the globe. His books reveal the commonality of seemingly disparate beliefs, all of them showing the human being aspiring toward spirituality.

Many Native American tales are of religious origin and fulfill a spiritual purpose. It may be difficult for non-Native readers to see religion in Cherokee tales such as "Corn Woman Spirit," in which ravens free Corn Woman from evil spirits who have hidden her in a cave. Cherokee religious tales are vastly different from the narratives told in the Bible and other teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Or are they so different? Readers might discover a deeper appreciation of Cherokee stories by comparing and contrasting them with stories from their own religious training.

Stories are important in teaching moral values and tribal history, Freeman Owle reminds the reader. "Each and every story had a real reason for it. The Cherokees did not have schools, so they had to tell stories to teach their children." Stories like "How the Possum Lost His Tail" or "The Brave, the Mighty Warrior" warn the listener against boastfulness and arrogance. In "The Old Man and the Birds," the thief suffers and dies of starvation as a consequence of stealing food, and the listener learns a Cherokee version of the Hindu concept of karma—what goes around, comes back around.

History lessons are embodied in tales which recount the "Trail of Tears," the forced removal of Cherokees from North Carolina to "Indian Territory" (which later became the state of Oklahoma). "In learning these lessons," says Duncan, "we also learn the place of a Cherokee person in relation to the rest of the world. If you are a Cherokee child hearing these stories, you learn all these things, and above all you learn what it means to be Cherokee."

During the 1838 Trail of Tears, 13,000 Cherokee Indians were forced to walk three to five months, journeying from North Carolina to Oklahoma on foot. More than four thousand died enroute. Some Cherokees, however, managed to remain in North Carolina, so that today there are two bands of Cherokee: Eastern and Western. The history of the splitting of the Cherokee is accounted for in the legend of Tsali, a Cherokee man who was taken with his family at gunpoint to join the march west. Early in the journey, an incident occurred between soldiers and Tsali's wife; a struggle ensued, during which Tsali and his sons killed two soldiers and fled into the mountains.

Eventually the government struck a deal in which Tsali and his sons surrendered and were executed; in exchange, other Cherokees hiding in the mountains were allowed to remain. These became the Eastern Band, who now live in 57,000 acres of mountainous western North Carolina called the Qualla Boundary area. An outdoor reenactment of the legend of Tsali, "Unto These Hills," is produced every summer by the Cherokee and attended by thousands of tourists. Tsali's story exemplifies the Cherokee tribal value of putting the good of the whole ahead of one's individual concerns.

About the author

Barbara R. Duncan is an independent scholar who lives in western North Carolina. *Living Stories of the Cherokee* is the first comprehensive collection of Cherokee stories since James Mooney's *Myths of the Cherokee*, originally published in 1900 (new edition, 1996).