

The Storytelling Instinct, or Why Fairy Tales Stick

Jack Zipes is arguably the world's foremost scholar of the fairy tale. The body of his writings in the field over 40 years is astounding. He began his interest as a boy in 1946 after an encounter with Albert Einstein, who told him that if he wanted to do well in life, he needed to study fairy tales. When the smartest man in the world gives you advice, take it. John Smelcer, himself a folklorist who got his start after a similar encounter with Joseph Campbell, is currently at work re-visioning one of the world's most beloved fairy tales. The author of two dictionaries of endangered Alaska Native languages and numerous books on Native American folktales, and with training in anthropology, linguistics, comparative literature, and the fairy tale, it was only fitting that the two should meet for this interview.

JS: Today, perhaps as much or more than ever, fairy tales permeate our culture in literature, music, art, and especially cinema (consider the success of Disney and *Shrek*). And while we generally think of fairy tales as the realm of children, much of these mediums are for adults (consider *Wicked*). The question arises, with all our modernity and science and technology, why do fairy tales persist? I realize this is precisely the title of one of your recent books, *Why Fairy Tales Stick* (Routledge, 2006).

JZ: If anybody asks me why fairy tales stick, I always respond with a question: Why do we breathe? We don't know exactly how long human beings have told fairy tales, but we do know more or less that people began telling stories as soon as they were able to speak. They probably communicated with gestures, dancing, painting, and other artifacts even before they could speak. What kinds of tales did they tell? Clearly, they communicated warnings, instructions, explanations, and anything that helped them adapt to their environments and to survive. They also communicated with metaphors. Gradually, they embroidered and embellished their

communications with descriptions and learned to construct their stories artfully to entertain, amuse, and instruct listeners. The more artful they became, the more the stories resonated, and since the early humans did not know how to write, they stored relevant stories in their brains. And, just as it was then, so it is now.

JS: Your comment reminds me of something J. R. R. Tolkien, himself a linguist and scholar of the myth and fairy tale, wrote in *Tree and Leaf*, “Speaking of the history of stories and especially fairy-stories we may say that the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story, has always been boiling.” I agree that language is among our most important survival mechanisms. Noam Chomsky with his Minimalist Program and Steven Pinker in books like his *The Language Instinct* argue that we humans have not simply a *propensity* to acquire language, but an *instinct* to do so. They argue that our brains are genetically hard-wired for language. Like you, I have always conjectured that people began telling stories as soon as they were able to speak. It seems to be rational that our storytelling instinct coincides with and is sustained and transmitted by our language instinct (as far as I know, every culture on earth has a language and a corpus of stories, including myths, legends, and fairy tales—many of which, especially the more ancient ones, I dare say, find their way into the fabric of religion). At this point, it may be necessary to make a clarification. We’ve interchanged words like *story*, *fairy tale*, and *myth*. For this discussion, can we assume that we are broadly referring to the tradition that is storytelling, in whatever its form, realizing that each of these terms has its own definition?



JZ: Yes, I agree, and as our capacity to speak and reason has developed, we have sorted the tales in our minds and tended to define them by the way we have employed them in socio-cultural contexts. Over hundreds of years, the sorting has led to the developments of genres of storytelling. In the process we have stored tales in our brains when they have been important for us to adapt to our environments. I have recently hypothesized that the most important stories in a culture become memes. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins proposed in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) that human beings are not only wired by their genes but also by their memes. Dawkins maintains that there is one fundamental law of life that he believes is

undeniable: “the law that all life evolves by the differential survival of replicating entities. The gene, the DNA molecule, happens to be the replicating entity that prevails on our own planet. There may be others. If there are, provided certain other conditions are met, they will almost inevitably tend to become the basis for an evolutionary planet.”[i] Indeed, Dawkins argues that there is another new replicator that he calls a meme, a unit of cultural transmission. “Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, and ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. . . . memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically. When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell. And this isn’t just a way of talking; the meme for, say, ‘belief in life after death’ is actually realized physically, millions of times over, as a structure in the nervous systems of individual men the world over.” [ii]



JS: I would add *billions* of times over. I recall reading *The Selfish Gene* as a high school student only a few years after its initial publication. I met Dawkins many years ago. He and I both studied at Oxford (though decades apart). I would support that this memetic mechanism may also influence the language instinct; indeed, it may *be* the language instinct. The ability to communicate ideas—warnings, instructions, and to coordinate warfare, hunting, or farming—would be advantageous among groups as to necessitate transmission from generation to generation.

JZ: Much to Dawkins’ surprise, his speculative remarks in the last chapter of *The Selfish Gene* has led to the flowering of memetics, which has become one of the more controversial scientific theories in the twenty-first century.[iii] The theory of memetics generally maintains that a meme is an informational pattern contained in a human brain (or in artifacts such as books

or pictures) and stored in its memory, capable of being copied to another individual's brain that will store it and replicate it. Susan Blackmore contends that a meme's major trait is its capacity to be imitated and to replicate itself, and it is also what makes human beings different from all other animals. We copy and change all the time, and we are disposed to copying memes that want to be copied. "Memes spread themselves around indiscriminately without regard to whether they are useful, neutral, or positively harmful to us." [iv] The memes battle each other for a secure place in the brain, and in order to survive, it must exhibit three major characteristics: fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. A meme must be able to be copied only somewhat in a faithful way; it must be shaped or formed in such a way that many copies can be made; it must be able to survive a long time so that many copies will be disseminated. In time some memes form a *memplex*, which is a group of memes that facilitate replication and can be likened to a genre. According to Blackmore, memes co-evolve with genes, often influencing them, or are influenced by them. The dynamics will depend on the social and cultural environment.

JS: I remember speaking to Dawkins about how Darwinian principles might be extended to explain the spread of ideas and cultural phenomena, and specifically discussing his continued theory of replicators in his *The Extended Phenotype* (1982). At Oxford, Dawkins studied under Nobelist Nikolaas Tinbergen, whose own research interests lay in animal behavior, particularly instincts. Tinbergen was asking important questions such as why should animals have instincts and we have none? How are these instincts transmitted? Memes sound like the correct biological mechanism. About the notion that culture can influence genes/evolution, I recall one of the last episodes of *Cosmos* in which my late friend Carl Sagan successfully illustrated how culture can influence genetics. As a model, he showed how Japanese fisherman inadvertently influenced (artificial) natural selection of the Heiki crab (*Heikea japonica*).

JZ: Though memetics remains a hypothetical, if not speculative science, it seems to me that it offers a viable way to explore how the brains of humans function to store and disseminate tales, and among the tales we tell that deal with profound human and social problems are fairy tales which deal with sibling rivalry, jealousy, rape, violence, incest, infertility, reproduction, abuse, etc. The fairy tale is a hybrid genre that has evolved over thousands of years, and it offers a unique narrative mode that has developed and expanded with new means of technology. Today,

certain fairy tales can be found throughout the world in startlingly different variants that bear resemblances to one another.

JS: I certainly agree. Consider the ubiquitous flood myths or Alan Dundes' (et al) worldwide mapping of the "Cinderella" story and its variations among diverse cultures and languages. Speaking of languages, I'd like to clarify that while current theories on language acquisition support a universal propensity for all humans to learn languages, the theories are clear to note that this propensity is not toward any *particular* language. That is, a baby born in France is not programmed to learn French any more than she could learn Swahili or Mandarin or Ahtna (my second language). An interesting, yet highly unethical human subject test, would be to isolate a newborn, provide it with only basic nourishment and shelter, provide no communications of any kind, and see if the child would develop its own language and instinctually reinvent "Hansel and Gretel" or "Cinderella" or a storytelling tradition at all. I suspect that you would agree that fairy tales are not memetically replicated and transmitted *in toto*, but it is the *idea* of the tale, its essential archetypal message or symbol, which is replicated and transmitted? It seems to me that such a memetic process would support Jung's "collective unconscious," the idea that we share specific cultural memories (the way animals are born with certain instinctual knowledge). In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *The Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy Tales* (1913), Freud found fairy tales useful in illustrating his theories of symbols as expressing unresolved conflicts, anxieties, repressions and frustrations, attempting to discern the universal psychology of human behavior and culture. Even Joseph Campbell talked about "Deep Myths," those stories or story motifs that are so old so as to have become universal archetypal symbols, disseminated over large geographic regions as humanity populated the planet. Perhaps, unbeknownst to Freud, Jung, and Campbell, those symbols they sought to interpret were indeed the *memes* of imbedded cultural information exchange. To be sure, my book *The Raven and the Totem*, a collection of sixty traditional Alaska Native myths, includes an Eskimo myth that appears to be from so deep in human history, that the only rationale for its existence is that its transmission must be memetic in nature. In the myth, an Eskimo hunter comes across three ancient hunters tracking a mammoth. The man joins the band and, together, they kill the mammoth with spears and dine on it. It should be pointed out that woolly mammoth haven't roamed the arctic tundra since the Pleistocene.

JZ: I certainly agree that fairy tales and other cultural artifacts, which may be referred to as memes, are not stored *in toto* in the brain. Nor are they disseminated with fidelity because we keep changing memetic tales just as we keep changing ourselves as we adapt to our environments. I would also argue that tales as memes are culturally determined and do not always endure if they lose their relevance in a particular society. Some evolutionary anthropologists such as Robert Boyd, Peter Richerson Luigi Luca Cavalli Sforza, and Dan Sperber have preferred to use terms such as cultural adapter, mental/public representation, or cultural character instead of meme to describe a particular cultural artifact that is processed in our brains and is disseminated to provide relevant information, important for the continual formation and transformation of a culture. Their works are grounded in the exploration of cognitive psychology, linguistics, anthropology, and the science of the brain. I am very wary of Jungian and Freudian psychology and don't believe that they offer fundamental explanations of how tales, especially fairy tales, originate and are disseminated. I don't use such terms as collective unconscious or archetype because they tend to be too universal and abstract. Tales emanate from concrete experience that stimulates the mind and imagination. They are *historically* specific articulations of shared experiences that have very different meanings for people in their particular societies. The fact that there are amazing similarities in tale types throughout the world has less to do with a collective unconscious or archetypes in our imagination than with natural and culturally defined human responses and reactions to similar manifestations in environments.

JS: I've always said this about myths, in particular. To me, the reason why there are so many flood myths is because floods happen pretty much everywhere. People tend to settle along rivers and at the confluences of rivers. From a certain perception, a hundred-year flood appears to affect the world (at least a group's notion of the world based on known geographic boundaries).

JZ: The exciting thing about tales and storytelling is that they tell us how different we are from one another and how much we are alike at the same time. By tracing their socio-historical origins and studying the cultural patterns they create, we can learn how otherness is very much a part of us and how difference is to be respected. Much of the conflicts and disasters in our world

today have arisen because we have tried to efface peculiar and strange differences in the name of rational cultural homogenization. My hope is that our tales and storytellers will continue to leave their imprint on the world by bearing in mind the socio-historical evolution of tales and compelling us to see the uniqueness of all cultural articulations whether they be fairy tales, myths, or legends.

References:

[i] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976): 192.

[ii] *Ibid.*, 192.

[iii] For some of the more significant books on this topic, see Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (London: Penguin 1995); Richard Brodie, *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme* (Seattle: Integral Press, 1996); Aaron Lynch, *Thought Contagion: How Belief Spreads through Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Robert Aunger, ed. *Darwinizing Culture: The Status of Memetics as a Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and *The Electric Meme: A New Theory of How We Think* (New York: Free Press, 2002). There is also an electronic journal, *Journal of Memetics*, <http://jom-emit.cfpm.org>, and numerous websites with important information and essays such as "Papers on Memetics," <http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be>

[iv] Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, 7.

Dundes, Alan. *Cinderella: A Casebook*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988.

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Tolkien, J. R. R. *Tree and Leaf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965): 26.