

Book Review

by James H. Morrison

Gail de Vos, Merle Harris and Celia Barker Lottridge
Telling Tales: Storytelling in the Family
Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 2003

Throughout history, humankind has enjoyed telling stories and these stories reflected a beginning, a middle and an end. It is not an imaginative stretch to realize as the ancients did that the life of a human being can be viewed as a story. Human beings, no matter their longevity, reflect a beginning, a middle and inevitably an end – sooner or later. It is often said that we live our lives as a tale is told. Our stories begin with family. Family tales told many times identify us, our mortality and perhaps the immortality we hope to achieve. They are like nuggets of an historic past that are preserved orally and passed on through the generations. They may convey basic factual information but they also may teach us how to live and how to die. These stories may, as they did for Plutarch, drive away cares, exhilarate the mind and help one to depend on oneself.

Telling Tales: Storytelling in the Family by experienced storytellers Gail de Vos, Merle Harris and Celia Barker Lottridge is a handbook on storytelling and story collecting. It offers reflections by de Vos, Harris and Lottridge on how they became storytellers and their convictions about the function and value of storytelling. This is not a how-to-guide to interviewing family members and having their stories on tape or disc. This was best done by Vera Rosenbluth in her *Keeping Family Stories Alive: Discovering and Recording the Stories and Reflections of a Lifetime* which is now in a second edition (1997). Instead, *Telling Tales* is much more free flowing with the boundary

between fact and fiction a verbal grey zone. Storytellers often strive for meaning, not necessarily truth. It is a reflection of memory but more importantly of imagination by both the teller and the listener. These stories can be of life experiences, family history and remembered anecdotes. In my family, there is a family reunion of aunts and uncles and their children each July on the same date as my grandmother's birthday. These were started in the late 1950's and have continued although my grandmother died a decade ago. Poems are read, sung or performed about incidents that occurred over the past year or in some cases that occurred in the distant past. Almost always humorous, they keep alive a family tradition that has recently led to a "cousins' get-together" the day before. These story poems reflect the frailties of adults as well as children and this sharing leads to a deeper bonding with the extended family.

Telling Tales stresses the importance of such familial sharing and encourages the reader to keep family stories alive. Tell them, write them or read them - it doesn't matter - as long as they are conveyed to and through the next generation.

The authors also provide advice on how to shape and relate stories from families in such a way that it becomes your own story. Not everyone is a skilled storyteller and there is solid advice here on how to organize the story, how important the body and facial movements are and how to use the voice to create word pictures. "There is no right time to start telling your stories - the right time is now (p. 83)."

In the final section of the book, the authors skillfully turn to a broader view of storytelling - from nursery rhymes to folk tales to fairy tales - urging the reader to go beyond the Gospel According to Disney and explore the original folktales from around the world - be they Anansi of Africa or Hodja from Persia. Closer to home we can ask, what "stories" do our children learn from the media? What lessons do they impart? The authors encourage us to be aware of popular culture and make an effort to comprehend the stories that surround us in music, in movies and in advertisements every day.

The storytelling resources that conclude this volume are invaluable. They itemize websites, myths and legends, books, nursery rhymes and storytelling organizations. The authors have shared, by this inclusive listing, their enthusiasm for the art of storytelling and their commitment to the benefits of storytelling for family survival and cohesion. The value in the end is not in the stories but in the telling.

How does this excellent book speak to oral history and oral history practitioners? Should our emphasis in an interview always be about factual accuracy and "truth". Many times it is not what is true that is important to analyze but what people believe to be true, that guides their action. If the *mythistory* takes precedence over the history, then we must be familiar with why the people we interview are "Telling Tales" in order to better understand their past. This book is an excellent primer for that purpose.