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The Cycle of Story: From Fireplace to Marketplace or, “The Kids Keep Tearing Their Jeans”

In considering the cycle of story from fireplace to marketplace, we begin a journey from the domestic to the commercial, from private to public space, from the priceless human interaction of the story and the listener to the commercial transaction of the product and the consumer. If stories are to reach a larger audience, a consideration of the stories of the fireplace must include a consideration of the marketplace.

Those of us whose work includes stories will acknowledge that communicating our stories to audiences beyond the sound of our voices involves publishing those stories. Publishing, however, requires money, which generally involves convincing an editor and a marketing department that their company will make money (i.e., a profit) from our product. Perhaps not a lot of money, but money nonetheless. And money, as both Karl Marx and Cyndi Lauper have so eloquently put it, changes everything.

While stories are for all ages—with some audiences and tellers receiving more respect than others—the specific focus in this paper is the path from fireplace to marketplace as it applies to telling and publishing stories for a young audience—i.e., for children. The path is a problematic one for many. Despite the fact that we know that money makes many worlds go round, there is something about story as commodity, about putting a price tag on imagination, about the juxtaposition of concerns of children and of money, that makes many people extremely uncomfortable. This is true in the advanced capitalism of contemporary American society. This was equally true a century ago in the early years of American youth services librarianship. This is a profession with a long history of hostility toward the concept of story as commodity.

Effie L. Power's textbook *Library Service for Children* was published in 1930 by the American Library Association; the text (and its 1943 revision, *Work with Children in Public Libraries*) was considered “the” text in the training of children's librarians throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Power de-

voted several pages of the section on book selection to "fiction which fails to meet accepted standards," by which she meant the children's mass market series book (72). She condemned them as "books which cater to the lazy minded. . . easily detected by their hackneyed plots, wooden style, and lifeless characters" (73). Power illustrated these qualities with a critique of a representative book of the genre, *The Bobbsey Twins and Their Schoolmates*, noting that the book ("the 21st book of a mediocre series") contains an appendix that "calls attention to **other** titles in several long series" [emphasis in original] (73). While the story's ostensible purpose was clearly entertainment, Power stated "an ulterior purpose is suggested by specific reference to other books in the series" (74). The ulterior purpose was, of course, the promotion and sale of more books. And Power is adamant: "Obviously a book of this type has no place in children's reading" (75). Though the rhetoric has softened considerably since that time (one oft-cited anti-series salvo, Mary E.S. Root's 1929 article in *Wilson Library Bulletin*, was titled simply "Not to Be Circulated"), condemnations of mass market series books have continued to appear in the literature of youth services librarianship from that day to this. The series' lack of literary quality is the reason usually cited for librarians' negative view of series books, but along with that has been children's librarians' traditional rejection of story as commodity, of made-to-order texts for children marketed as "product." This division is not limited to children's publishing but is found throughout the book industry in the ongoing tension between culture and commerce, between texts as literature and texts as product (Coser).

It is understandably galling to children's librarians to spend even a part of their inadequate book budgets on series books that they know are manufactured solely to make a profit, each with its extra pages devoted to advertising more of the same, plus (as with the *Baby-Sitters Club* series) board games, charm bracelets, calendars, dolls, videos, and fan club membership. At the same time, the demand is certainly there. And reading research consistently identifies a strong positive correlation between children's series book reading and their later development into fluent adult readers (Carlsen 44-55; Carlsen and Sherrill 87-94). And yet . . . the idea that a children's story is simply one more saleable commodity continues to disturb those who are concerned with the preservation and perpetuation of story. And not just any story, but good stories, worthwhile stories, authentic stories, stories that nourish children's hearts and inspire their imaginations, the stories in the sort of books that Paul Hazard was referring to when he wrote, "'Give us books,' say the children, 'give us wings. You who are powerful and strong, help us to escape into the far-away. . . We are willing to learn everything that we are taught at school, but, please, let us keep our dreams'" (4). While this cry may or may not be a notion more romantic than realistic, picturing a children's book as

just another kind of widget to promote and sell, viewing young people as simply another group of consumers, their imaginations dulled by stories packaged and rewritten for the broadest audience appeal—these are troubling images.

When stories go to the marketplace is it possible for them not to slide down that very slippery slope to bland—or garish—commercialization, that place where it is impossible not to be blinded by the bottom line? What is “the integrity of a story”? If tellers and writers have one eye on the marketplace as they make a traditional story their own, have they sold out? These are vital questions for those of us whose work involves connecting young people with stories. And because we are living in a present filled with media tie-ins and television shows that are nothing more than half-hour commercials for story-linked action figures, breakfast cereal and computer games, one may be forgiven for thinking that things could hardly get worse, that young people’s minds will inevitably (and irrevocably) be corrupted by market forces. And what will our world look like when popular culture becomes the only culture, the only game in town?

THE GRIMMS AT THE MARKETPLACE

Despite the age-old feeling that present problems are far worse than past ones, there are useful parallels to be made between current struggles with the impact of capitalism on today’s stories and past struggles along the road from the fireplace to the marketplace. One such struggle occurred in Germany during the late eighteenth century, a time when a great number of small independent states were in the process of unifying under a common government—a process that came very late in comparison to other European countries. This was a time marked by great political tension. There was tension between France and Germany, recently exacerbated by Napoleon’s occupation of German land. There were also tensions between and among the many German-speaking jurisdictions as they moved, contentiously and reluctantly, toward unification. Not coincidentally, this was also the time of the Heidelberg Romantic Movement and its emphasis on German culture as a unique entity—the product of a single Germanic Volk—a movement that inspired the collecting of German folksongs, legends, and stories, as well as the birth and growth of German nationalism (Zipes, “Breaking” 70; Bottigheimer, “Bad Girls” 3-6).

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were Germans born in 1785 and 1786, the two oldest sons of the six children of Philipp Wilhelm Grimm, a magistrate who died in 1895, when Jacob and Wilhelm were eleven and ten years old. Their father’s death reduced the family’s resources and status, and Jacob and Wilhelm were well aware that their career success would be important to the welfare of their mother and siblings. They left home for school in Kassel in 1898 and from there went to the University of Marburg to study law. While in Marburg, they became increasingly interested in

the study of old German literature and became involved in the Heidelberg Romantic Movement. At the same time they wrote and sought to publish scholarly work that would contribute to the support of their family (Zipes, "Dreams" 206-213). In 1805-08, two Heidelberg scholars and writers, Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim, compiled, edited, and published one of the earliest collections of German folksongs, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (*The Youth's Wonderhorn*) (Ellis 7). The Grimm brothers assisted in this work, and four years later began compiling and editing a fairy tale collection that would be a record of German oral tradition for an adult and scholarly audience. With the help of Arnim, the Grimms published the first of two volumes of *Kinder- und Haus-Märchen* (*Nursery and Household Tales*) in 1812, the second volume in 1815 (Tatar 6).

There is a common but mistaken image of the Grimms as anthropologists of sorts, traveling about the countryside, stopping in villages to hear the stories of German peasants. This, however, was not the case; the Grimms did not gather their stories "in the field" (or, more accurately, in that picturesque—and imaginary—rural field) but from lower-middle and middle class urban women (such as Dorothea Viehmann, Marie and Jeannette Hassenpflug, and Dorchon Wild) who were skilled storytellers (Scherf 183-189). Along with many others, the Grimms believed that folktales—whether told in a hut or a drawing room—revealed "the true heart of the Volk." As scholars of linguistics and philology, they considered their work a scientific, rather than a popular, collection and included notes on sources and variants (Degh 68-70).

The Grimms edited their tales (and continued to edit their tales) from the first publication in 1812 to the final 1857 edition. The reviews of that first, scholarly edition were mixed, as critics welcomed this expression of the German volk spirit but deplored the tales' inappropriateness for children. Even friendly reviewers, such as Clemens Brentano, criticized the Grimms' adherence to oral tradition at the expense of reader comfort; Brentano wrote, "If you want to display children's clothing you can do that quite well without bringing out an outfit that has buttons torn off it, dirt smeared on it, and the shirt hanging out of the pants," while Arnim suggested that they add a subtitle that would be a "parental guidance" warning: "for parents, who can select stories for retelling" (Tatar 16).

There is no question that the Grimms were aware that the marketplace value of their collection would increase considerably if the tales were made "suitable for children." At that time Jacob and Wilhelm were supporting two of their younger brothers. In addition, the financial incentive was considerable: projected royalties for the edition were 500 talers, a sum roughly equivalent to each of the brothers' yearly income. As literary scholar Maria Tatar noted, "the Grimms may never have made or even hoped to make a financial killing on the *Nursery and Household Tales*, but the profit motive was certainly not wholly absent from their calculations

and to some extent must have guided their revisions [on the first edition]" (14). Indeed, with an eye to their audience, the second edition's introduction stated: "we have thus eliminated in this edition any expression that is not suitable for childhood" (Ward 95). In this new expurgated (and certainly less authentic) edition, sexual references were eliminated and violence was confined to that which made sense in a moral world: the good were rewarded, the bad punished, with punishments growing progressively harsher and more detailed as the editions continued to be edited and published. Increasingly, the tales emphasized correct morals, manners, and behavior; the value of diligence and the value of hard work; beauty linked to virtue; and national pride (Tatar 28-33).

Kinder- und Haus-Märchen went through a total of 17 editions from 1812 to 1857, when the final edition was published. The first and second editions sold moderately well. In 1823, however, translator Edgar Taylor published an illustrated children's edition of a selection of Grimms' tales in English that was a popular and commercial success (Bottigheimer, "Bad Girls" 10, 19). Noting this success, Wilhelm Grimm compiled and edited an illustrated edition of 50 of the best-known tales that was published in 1825. The text was illustrated (by their brother Ludwig) and further revised specifically for a young audience. It was this "Small Edition," which contained Snow White, The Frog King, Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Rumpelstiltskin and other now-familiar stories, that became a popular bestseller. In the years that followed, the Grimms published further editions of the tales and in 1850, the Grimms' tales became part of the Prussian elementary school curriculum. Grimms' tales went on to become part of curriculum of all German schools, where they were read and studied by every German school child through the end of the Second World War (Bottigheimer, "Bad Girls" 21).

The Grimms made few public statements about their expurgation, consistently describing the changes they made as ones that brought the story "closer to the original." It is clear, however, that the Grimms were also editing with an awareness of the youth of their primary audience. As Grimms scholar Maria Tatar has pointed out, "Wilhelm Grimm rewrote the tales so extensively and went so far in the direction of eliminating off-color episodes that he can be credited with sanitizing folktales and thereby paving the way for the process that made them acceptable children's literature in all cultures" (24). Indeed, the Grimms were among those who led the way to the cultural riches in the tales of the fireplace; and their interest in the actual riches to be had in refashioning the tales for young audiences led the way to the marketplace as well.

MAKING STORIES SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN

"Suitable for children" continues to be a key factor in turning a story into a product—the seemingly inevitable transformation/transmo-

grification of figurative cultural capital to literal cultural capital. And it was into this complex process that Power and other children's librarians inserted themselves as arbiters in discerning and promoting "the rarest kind of best" in stories for young people. But acting in this role does not mean we are immune to the tension between the questions, "Is this story an authentic representation of a culture's narrative voice(s)?" and "Will this story sell? And, if not, can (should?) something (anything?) be done to transform the story, to give it more 'curb appeal'?"

Sometimes these changes and transformations appear to be thoughtless cultural erasures, as in William Sleator's *The Angry Moon*, a Caldecott Honor book that combines a Tlingit Indian tale with narrative conventions of European folklore, using three rather than four as a mythic number. Someone apparently thought that this change was an improvement, but what was the original story? And what else might have been altered to make this a story for mainstream Western audiences?

Sometimes these changes appear as deliberate expurgation, as with Charlotte Huck's text for *Princess Furball*, a variant of the Grimms tale "Allerleirauh" ("Thousandfurs"), the story of a king determined to marry his daughter, who responds by fleeing to a neighboring kingdom. Huck changed the story to eliminate any reference to incest (in her telling, the girl runs away because her father has ordered her to marry an ogre). From this point, the story's plot proceeds more or less like the original, but Huck's editing has in fact changed the characters of both the girl and her father, which in turn changes the entire logic of the story. The tale becomes more "suitable for children," but at what cost?

Sometimes tellers (including ourselves) change stories to reflect the folk motifs that are an integral part of our own personal schema of "the way things ought to be." We do this not only with folklore from other cultures, but with our personal stories as well. We tell and retell our stories, creating and recreating the meanings we have ascribed to the stories that are our lives. It is, after all, painfully disconcerting to feel that our life experiences are directed in part by chance, by the chaotic movement of people, by small and large events beyond our control, by wars and treaties, good and bad harvests, disease and health, poverty and wealth. And that these factors, whether random or preordained, have converged to put all of us here in this place at this present moment.

We want roots, we want to feel like we are standing on solid ground. And our stories give us that foundation. There is a sense in which our stories, our individual narratives, are the most personal, the most intimate entities in our lives. Even in our dreams we turn what may be simply the random firing of neurons into a story. Regardless of how much or how little sense a dream makes, it is still a story, it is still our story, a story that only we will ever experience.

There is a terrible indignation about the people who sell a culture's stories; who sell our stories; who sell our stories and get them wrong who sell our stories and get them wrong but because there are 10,000 print copies of their version and only a single oral version of our story, their story "wins" and becomes "the" story. And what could be more infuriating than to watch as an oral narrative—a story that is owned by everyone and no one—is claimed as one person's intellectual property, copyrighted, and sold. We get no money in this transaction, so we can only feel deprived. Do we lose when our stories are turned into commodities? And if so, what exactly is it that we have lost?

STORIES IN THE MARKETPLACE

In the chaos and glitz of the marketplace, we get stories, stories, and more stories, churned out like so many Franklin Mint collectibles, while the Opies' masterful children's folklore collection *I Saw Esau* (with illustrations by Maurice Sendak!) sits on the remainder table at Borders. Multiple versions of the Grimms' tales continue to proliferate, but, as Betsy Hearne noted in her survey of in-print editions of *Sleeping Beauty*, most of the texts she examined display an indifference on the part of authors and illustrators to the tale's sources or internal logic—evidently the publishers' motivations "must have been marketing potential rather than aesthetic or psychological appreciation of the story's value" (233). And when young people ask for the "real" version of *Snow White*, what they are asking for is not the Grimms' tale but Grumpy, Dopey, Sneezy, Happy, Sleepy, Bashful, and Doc. The Disney version has become "the real version."

The monolith of popular culture embodied in mass market narratives like *Goosebumps*, *Power Rangers*, and *Sweet Valley High* seems so large and powerful and children so small and powerless. But what do children do with that mass market "real version" once they acquire it in print or in other media—in comic, video, game, or action figure? The story of children and popular culture in print or plastic, audio or visual, doesn't end at the cash register.

In his book, *Understanding Popular Culture*, cultural theorist John Fiske uses the image and the actuality of blue jeans to make some observations about the dynamic nature of popular mass market culture in his essay, "The Jeaning of America." Clothing has long been a signifier of various meanings to both the wearer and the observer. At one time jeans were an item of apparel that signified rebellion; now they are ubiquitous, worn by members of a range of classes and cultures. Despite the apparent commonality, however, wearers of jeans—particularly young people—will often purchase their ready-to-wear jeans and then immediately change them to create their own self-representation that may be decidedly different from the look that Ralph Lauren or Liz Claiborne had in mind.

If today's jeans are to express oppositional meanings, or even to ges-

ture toward such social resistance, they need to be disfigured in some way—tie-dyed, irregularly bleached, or, particularly, torn. If “whole” jeans connote shared meanings of contemporary America, then disfiguring them becomes a way of distancing oneself from those values . . . at the simplest level, this is an example of a user not simply consuming a commodity but reworking it, treating it not as a completed object to be accepted passively, but as a cultural resource to be used (Fiske 4, 10).

The free market economy of the late twentieth century is characterized by a seemingly endless cycle of manufactured commodities that are advertised and sold to consumers, whose money provides both paychecks and profit statements to workers and owners, respectively. But focusing solely on the process of supplying commodities to customers obscures the meanings of those commodities from the perspective of the consumer. And not simply consumers as subjects of market research, but consumers as creators of their own meanings. And much as producers would like to control the meanings their products have for their customers, the fact is, they cannot. In the case of jeans, when manufacturers saw that young people were washing, bleaching, and ripping their jeans, they began producing “factory-made tears, or by ‘washing’ or fading jeans in the factory before sale. This process of adopting the signs of resistance incorporates them into the dominant system and thus attempts to rob them of any oppositional meanings” (Fiske 18). But as soon as faded jeans appear on the clothing racks at the Gap or at Target, young jeans wearers begin to alter those jeans to create a new modification, a new Look. And so it goes.

Popular culture always is part of power relations; it always bears traces of the constant struggle between domination and subordination, between power and various forms of resistance to it or evasions of it, between military strategy and guerrilla tactics. Evaluating the balance of power within this struggle is never easy: Who can say, at any one point, who is “winning” a guerilla war? The essence of guerilla warfare, as of popular culture, lies in not being defeatable. Despite nearly two centuries of capitalism, subordinated subcultures exist and intransigently refuse finally to be incorporated—people in these subcultures keep devising new ways of tearing their jeans (Fiske 19).

It is common knowledge that a handful of giant corporations dominate the communications industry, both nationally and internationally. ABC is a subsidiary of Disney, which also owns theme parks, an oil and gas company, cable channels, magazines, newspapers, record companies, an insurance company, and even a hockey team. Time Warner owns Turner Broadcasting, parent company of CNN, as well as sports teams, cable companies, film studios, and retail stores. NBC is now owned by GE, while CBS belongs to Westinghouse. Fox Television is part of Rupert Murdoch’s media empire, which also includes HarperCollins publishing, newspapers, magazines, and television stations. Not surprisingly, many observers worry

about the impact of having so many channels of communication controlled by a small number of mega-corporations.

It is difficult not to worry about the impact this “literary-industrial complex” will have on our democratic future (West 1-7). As one of the many who are dedicated to the promotion of quality texts representing a diversity of viewpoints to young readers, this is certainly one of my worries. But just when I think that corporations really are on the verge of success as they strive to turn people into consumer automatons, that they really have cracked the code for how to get us to want whatever it is they have to sell and reject anything not previously seen on television, I consider the folk culture that surrounds us. In the apprehension generated by the Big Picture, it is important to remember the Small Picture as well, by which I mean the folk culture that is part of our everyday lives and, for the purposes of this paper, the everyday lives of children.

The image of traditional folk culture pictures the individual or the group fashioning meaningful objects from natural materials, meaningful stories from their observations of the heavens, the earth, the oceans, the weather, and other natural phenomena. But manufactured objects, urban landscapes, and mass media can also be used by the individual and the group as raw materials from which to fashion their own meanings and culture that may or may not be quite different from those ascribed by the corporate creators of those objects or that media. Fiske describes this creation of popular culture as “necessarily the art of making do with what is available” (15). In earlier times, “what is available” might be leaves or pebbles or bamboo or animal skins. Contemporary folk artists may use bottle caps or broken china or discarded tires or styrofoam cups. In our throw-away culture, there is always something available. And who knows this better than children?

CHILDREN, HALLOWEEN COSTUMES, AND THE FOLK PROCESS

Ready-made Halloween costumes depicting the mass media characters most popular with children in a given year are one example that is used as evidence of the deterioration of the pure and innocent ghosts and pirates, hobos and monsters, witches and princesses from when we were children. As one adult, a package designer for Hasbro Toys, stated, “What kids want and what they fantasize about is just a regurgitation of what they’ve seen on TV. It’s scary, that their fantasies are so controlled by the media, and what adults think will sell to kids. And Halloween’s just more of the same” (Jenkins 1). However, in my research into children’s Halloween costume choices and aesthetics, I found that the plastic costumes off the rack at K-Mart are really not a threat to the folk process. If we take a close look at the lives of many young people in contemporary U.S. culture during the final weeks of October, we will see that—both figuratively and literally—children continue to tear their jeans.

I conducted my research among the 300-plus students, age 5 to 12, of a single elementary school in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I conducted group and individual interviews during the week before Halloween. I asked children to describe their costumes for the current and for past years, their decision-making process for determining their costume choice, and their standards for what they thought constituted a good costume or a poor one.

The answers I got fell into distinct patterns according to the age of the child. The children described by the Hasbro employee, who “just want to be what they see on TV,” were the youngest: preschoolers, kindergartners, and some first-graders. They are great fans of television superhero cartoon shows and their play often involved those characters. By the time most students were in first grade, however, many saw store-bought superhero costumes as babyish, with some even claiming to hate their old cartoon favorites. Many of them consulted their parents in choosing a costume, which might very well be an older sibling’s former costume, but most felt that they themselves had final say on their choice. Children in first and second grade might have an adult/parent-created costume—an E.T. with every line and wrinkle sewn in, for example, or a knight with elaborate cardboard armor, or a Cinderella in a miniature ball gown. But they were beginning to place greater importance on creating at least some part of their own costume themselves. By third grade, nearly all students viewed Halloween costumes as not simply a requirement for peer acceptance or trick-or-treating, but as a self-created signifier of some aspect of their identity. This could be a weighty decision; one boy described his decision-making process: “Right now my mind is racing between a devil and a lumberjack” (Jenkins 4). They were inspired by other costumes, by peers, by television shows, comics, books, favorite activities, or future aspirations. They might be a doctor, or a tennis star, or a character out of a favorite comic book, or one of the more traditional choices of pirate, hobo, witch, gypsy, ghost, etc.

The oldest elementary students (fourth and fifth graders) placed great importance on making or putting their costume together themselves. They might ask for some small amount of help from parents, but only after they had already decided what they would be. They took particular delight in describing what I call collage objects, such as lion paws created out of gardening gloves and stick-on fingernails, or frog’s eyes made from ping pong balls. All of these involved taking familiar objects and reconfiguring them to create something new. Borrowing an older sibling’s hair mousse, a younger sibling’s stuffed tiger, and becoming Calvin of “Calvin and Hobbes,” was just exactly right to them. In fashioning their own costumes the older students, who were as avid as young students in their consumption of popular culture, consistently rejected the mass customization of a manufactured costume in favor of the “homemade”

costume, that is, one designed and created by and for themselves. So what did these older children make of the off-the-rack versions of Spiderman, Pocahontas, Hercules, and the Little Mermaid? "Oh well, those are really for little kids" (Jenkins 9).

Overall, the students placed a high value on personal choice in costumes, no matter how rudimentary the result. Given this fact, it is hardly surprising that store-bought costumes are most popular with young children. They want some choice, but most are not old enough to be able to assemble a costume themselves. Their best compromise is a ready-to-wear costume that they pick out themselves from among a store display of other such costumes. Hence the brief but intense attraction of costumes from K-Mart for preschoolers and kindergartners. The folk process survives another onslaught from those who would turn everything they could sell into commodities.

It is the same with story, whether it is an explanation of how the sun and moon came to live in the sky, or why mosquitoes buzz in people's ears, or how our great-grandparents came to America, or what Godzilla does when he's not terrorizing Tokyo, or who used to live in the house next door. Stories are pieced together from the old and the new, are created and recreated over and over again, and no matter how much Disney Studios wants their version of Beauty and the Beast to be "the" version, no matter how many media tie-ins they license, the underlying story is not static. With or without permissions, we take it and use it; we act it out with Barbies and stuffed animals; we refashion it to tell to our children, our students, or our therapists; we take a piece of this version and a piece of that version, a piece of Jo March and Professor Bhaer, a piece of *Daddy Longlegs*, and perhaps even a piece of our own lives; we take it and change it and use it and make it ours. The children keep tearing their jeans. And so, I hope, will we.

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