

Tricksters: Breaking Boundaries

By Alice Albarda

Folk tales are as diverse and unique as the countries and cultures from which they originate. However, one special character type manages to weave his way through many of them: the trickster. Trickster tales have been a part of oral culture in virtually every region of the world. Today, tricksters have made their way into pop culture, such as Marvel's interpretation of the Norse god Loki, catching the attention of teens and adults alike. As YA literature based on mythology and folklore gains popularity, trickster figures from ancient folk tales may gain popularity as well, making a reappearance many centuries after they were first conceived. So what is a trickster?

Defining the trickster character type is made difficult by the fact that tricksters are often ambiguous outsiders who break boundaries and cross borders (Hynes, 1993). For example, they could cross borders between right and wrong or between mortals and gods. Tricksters also, of course, originate from diverse cultures that shape the character's actions and appearance. However, these



diverse figures often share some similar characteristics.

The trickster often takes the form of a small or weak animal. Animal tricksters from North American include the raven of Haida folklore, the southwestern coyote, rabbits, beavers, and many others. In West Africa and the West Indies, the trickster takes the form of a spider (or sometimes a human) named Anansi (Stott, 2010; Hamilton, 1997). Africans brought to the United States in the slave trade brought with them trickster tales, which evolved into

a figure known as Brer Rabbit (Hamilton, 1997, p.13.). The trickster figure could also be a human or a god, like the Greek god Hermes, the Mi'kmaq trickster-hero Kluskap, or the Ojibwe Nanabozho.

In a typical trickster story, the trickster wants something that is out of reach. He tricks another character in order to get what he wants and leaves before the dupe figures out what has happened (Scheub, 2010, p. 24). Sometimes the trickster's plan backfires and he loses his prize, is punished, or is tricked in return. Trickster figures may appear in other types of stories but this formula is one of the most common.

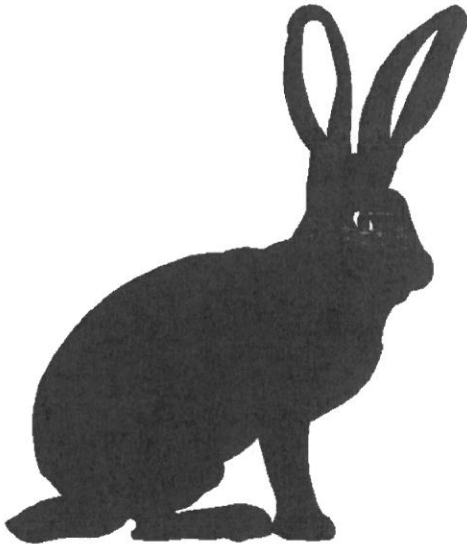
Tricksters often push the limits of their societies by breaking laws and taboos. They are often amoral, not limiting themselves with rules of customs (Hynes, 1993). They often lie, cheat, and steal to get what they want. The trickster's amoral actions are meaningful because they stand in contrast to a society's values and beliefs. This highlights how important those values are to the culture from whence the story came (Hynes, 1993; Scheub, 2010).

Trickster tales often have an etiological nature, meaning that they

explain how something in our world came to be. For example, in one story from the Caddo Nation of the southeastern United States, the night creatures draw portraits of themselves in the sky to provide light at nighttime (Edmonds & Farritor, 2010). After Coyote accidentally destroys their portraits, the other animals reject him. The pebbles become stars and Coyote spends every night howling for a second chance. Coyote's foolish actions lead to the creation of the starry night sky. In one African-American story, Brer Rabbit (or "Buh Rabby") jumps on Bruh Gator's head to knock him out, leaving a knot between his eyes and his nose that is still there today (Hamilton, 1997).

As well as explaining the practical aspects of creation, etiological tales "symbolize the way that human actions affect the world and shape the world as we know it now out of chaos," as a way of teaching a moral lesson (Scheub, 2010, p.7). In a story from the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, Rabbit the chatterbox talks his way into fishing lessons from Fox (Tingle & Lewis, 2010). Of course, Fox's lessons are actually a trick and he persuades Rabbit that he must sit on a hole in the ice and catch fish with his tail. Rabbit manages to

catch a fish this way, but loses his tail trying to pull the fish up! This folk tale acts as an etiological tale about the rabbit's short tail, as well as a moral lesson about not talking too much.



Trickster tales often include an element of transformation or shapeshifting. Etiological tales are naturally accompanied by transformation. The three folk tales mentioned previously show how the night sky, the alligator's head, and the rabbit's tail transformed from the way they used to be into the way they are now. Shape shifting or disguises could also be used as a method of deception (Hynes, 1993). For example, the beaver in a story from the Cowlitz tribe of the Pacific Northwest disguises himself as an old man in order to trick four

brothers and eat them (Eyley & Coon, 2010). In a legend from the Haida people of British Columbia, the whole world is dark because an old man is keeping all the light in the world in a box in his cabin. Raven transforms himself into a human and pretends to be the old man's grandson, eventually tricking the old man into opening the box and releasing the light (Reid & Bringhurst, 1984).

Why might tricksters appeal to teens? In many ways, the trickster and the teenager can both be defined in similar terms of binary opposition. As the trickster is both human and divine, good and evil, the adolescent is both child and adult. Teens may also be attracted to the notion of boundary-breaking and pushing the limits of the world around them. Testing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and questioning why those boundaries exist is a natural part of adolescence and trickery alike. The transformation and shape shifting that takes place in trickster tales is akin to the physical, emotional, intellectual, and social transformation that teenagers undergo. As folklore and mythology makes its way into YA literature and pop culture,

perhaps teens will find some understanding in the trickster figures who they encounter.

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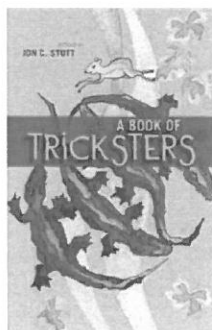
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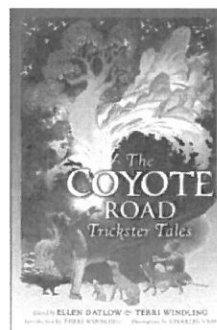
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