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Open Journal Systems Folklore v. Fakelore,  
the Epic Battle (2014 Butler Lecture.

## Folklore V. Fakelore, The Epic Battle (2014 Butler Lecture)

by Jane Yolen

*Hosted by the Dominican University School of Information Studies and the Butler Children's Literature Center in River Forest, IL (USA), the Butler Lectures showcase award-winning creators of books for young people and academic experts who speak on issues related to children's literature and the joy of reading and lifelong learning. Jane Yolen presented the second Butler Lecture on February 26, 2014.*

A number of years ago, California folklorist Alan Dundes mentioned the word "fakelore" witheringly to me on the phone as we were deep in negotiations about an essay of mine he wanted to reprint in his *Cinderella Casebook*, an essay called "America's Cinderella."<sup>[1]</sup>

I took slight umbrage at his comment, being one of those very people he was railing against, and yet I realized that he was placing me in very good company —

Madame LePrince du Beaumont and Mdme D'Aulanoy, of course, Angela Carter, Isak Dinesen and Laurence Housman, Hans Christian Andersen and Oscar Wilde. Of course, had he thought of it, Dundes would have also included that old bowlderizer and popularizer, Andrew Lang who established children's folklore collections with his *Color Fairy Books*.

Dundes wrote about the term "fakelore" in an article called "Nationalistic Inferiority Complexes and the Fabrication of Fakelore: A Reconsideration of Ossian, the Kinder-und Hausmarchen, the Kalevala, and Paul Bunyan," though really he was following in the footsteps of the great Richard M. Dorson who had coined the neologism, that oh-so-clever punditry which — as Dundes put it — served Dorson in his "lifelong battle to promote the scientific study of folklore and to attack fake folklore." [2]

*Fake folklore.* That battle had begun with Dorson's barrage called "Folklore and Fake Lore," a piece published in 1950 in the *American Mercury*, a popularizing magazine, though later he wrote a longer work about fakelore published in 1976. [3] It was an ongoing and nasty part of a debate/critique/review of author James Stevens who had written a book on Paul Bunyan. [4] Dorson wrote dismissively of Stevens' book as well as the work of Ben Botkin, basically calling both of them purveyors of fakelore, saying they were creating "a synthetic product claiming to be authentic oral tradition but were actually tailored for mass edification." [5]

*For mass edification.* Isn't that a withering condemnation? I wonder what Dorson thought the folk and fairy tales were for, if not for mass edification — oh, and delight!

I believe that in the beginning both Dorson and Dundes merely meant the word to mean — in Dorson's definition — "a presentation of spurious and synthetic writings *under the claim* they are genuine folklore." (My emphasis.) And by genuine, he meant folklore "collected in the field." [6] But eventually that turned into a larger, more complicated argument that was unsustainable because Dorson also railed against "the treasuries, Paul Bunyan books, and children's story collections," among others. But the most serious charge, I believe, was where he said that the authors, editors, and publishers had knowingly and willingly "mised and gulled the public." [7]

I think what Dundes and Dorson were getting at had more to do with the perception that a written or art tale carries with it an acknowledgement of personal history. I can agree with that. But even fairy tales that we so often claim are universal and ageless carry the thumbprints of their own time. An international lawyer speaking at a fairy tale conference I attended at Princeton some years ago showed us how the fairy tale punishments in classic European fairy tales could be explained in terms of the community mores and laws from

the era in which each story came from. Thus the witch shoved into the oven in “Hansel and Gretel,” or the wicked queen in her red hot iron shoes were reflections of prevailing laws about the burning of witches, and so forth.

That our stories are mirrors of our time, reflecting prevalent prejudices and class hatreds, should not surprise us. The tellers, retellers, the originators of art tales do not live in a vacuum but in a specific community. Our stories are part of our tribal mentality, even for those of us who like to think that our tribe is global. We can try to escape small-mindedness, prejudice, hatred, but the verdict of future historians, scholars, and readers will task us for our biases, our judgments, our laws.

Let me give you two fairy tale examples.

Think “Puss in Boots,” where the troll/dragon who has lived many year as the king’s neighbor with never a harsh word between them. Or at least none we are made aware of in the story. He is an employer of the local peasantry and none of them seem to curse his name. Indeed, his fields are well tended, his people well looked after *as far as we can tell from the story*.

Along comes Puss who decides to help his young master to a large slice of the noble pie and, like Mr. Romney and Bain Capital, he disposes of the troll/dragon, then takes over the family business. And we all applaud Puss’ ingenuity and his courage, not because the troll/dragon has been demonstrably wicked or evil. After all, unlike some of his cousins, he hasn’t been devouring the local gentry. However, the troll/dragon is fair game for Puss simply because he is The Other. In fairy tale terms, he is a red shirt; he is disposable. Nobody mourns him, and everyone considers the trickster Puss to be a genius.

Now think “Rumpelstiltskin.”

A miller tells the king’s messenger his daughter can spin straw into gold. He lies — and he knows he is lying. His daughter is complicitous in the lie. She knows he is lying and now she is lying too. The king wants the girl because he wants the gold. If she does not produce the gold, he will kill her. If she does produce the gold, he will marry her. The perfect wife with an ongoing dowry.

The king locks the girl into a room in a tower. She has till dawn to do the deed, to prove that she is worthy to be married to the king, worthy to live another day, worthy to keep supplying the kingdom with gold.

Do we like any of these folks? Not really. They are liars, greedy guts, narcissists all.

But wait...

The miller’s daughter sits weeping by a spinning wheel in the small room,

surrounded by piles and piles of straw, certain that in the morning she will die because she knows that spinning straw into gold is well above her pay grade. And because her father lied about it.

A little man enters. An odd little man. Not at all like the girl who — after all — is also very beautiful. We are in a fairytale, remember. This is a little man with a big nose and an unpronounceable name who lives outside the walls of the city. He tells her that he can save her because he can do what she is incapable of — supplying the king with the gold he desires.

In return, unthinking, desperate, she offers him her first-born child though it will be years, a lifetime perhaps, before she can do what she promises. Certainly, if she is dead in the morning, the promise of a child will be moot. She doesn't ask the little man why he wants the child. For her it's simply a good bargaining chip. But I am not liking her more because of this. I am liking her less.

Then the little man sits down at the spinning wheel and *he* does what he promised. *He* did not lie. He can do the miraculous as if it is an everyday event — and for him it is. It's his job. The only one he's allowed. And he also keeps none of the gold. Why should he? He knows how to make more.

Now, who does this remind you of — this little man, with his large nose, his foreign, unpronounceable name. This little ugly manikin who can supply the kingdom's gold, though he is not allowed to live within the kingdom's walls, but only somewhere out there, away from the real, true folk, somewhere out of sight.

And why is it the new queen can renege on her promise when she actually has that child? Could it be because — though we have no evidence of it within the story — because this little man wants her child for some unspeakable blood rites?

It's certainly not too big a leap to realize that Rumpelstiltskin is a stand-in for the Jew. Interesting to note that in a variant of Rumpelstiltskin in England — called "Tom Tit Tot" — the little man is a little black imp. [8] In a variant in Eastern Europe, he is a gypsy. That trio of perfect medieval victims: Jew, black, gypsy. Still perfect victims one might add, well into the middle of the twentieth century, perhaps beyond. We still tell the story, after all, without looking any deeper into it, and call it *just* a fairy tale.

How often the best of authored fanelore stories have already moved back into the folk corner, some even becoming canon. And there they hide for any number of years until they emerge again as — *ta! ta!* — folk stories. Think *Goldilocks*, *The Ugly Duckling*, *Beauty and the Beast*. *The Little Mermaid*, *The White Cat*, *Aladdin*. More recently, several of my own creations — *Greyling*, *Sleeping Ugly*, *Once A Good Man*, *The Girl Who Cried Flowers* — have taken such journeys. [9] I've watched Tomie de Paola's *Strega Nona*, among dozens and dozens of others

authored stories, make the same trek with thanks to librarians and the new generation of storytellers. [10]

Virginia Haviland, the late grande dame of the U.S. Library of Congress' children's section, believed *Strega Nona* was the "lost Italian version of 'The Mill that Ground Salt at the Bottom of the Sea'" (Arne-Thompson tale type 565). She came tripping across the marble floor of the Library of Congress to embrace dePaola, telling him so with great enthusiasm, though dePaola — who laughingly tells this story on himself — made *Strega Nona* up and set it in Italy only because he is Italian. Dear Virginia Haviland refused to believe him and it was a jolly, half joking, long-running argument between them till the day she died. [11]

*That's* what Dorson forgot, or — for the sake of his argument — ignored. And when Dundes picked up that particular torch, he ignored it as well. These stories travel in and out of the oral tradition, in and out of the written tradition, and back again. We find them in heiroglyphs and on parchment scrolls hidden away in caves, in day books and jest books. We find them in rabbinical midrashim and Christian and Buddhist and Muslim parables. We find them around campfires and hearthfires and on the decks of long sea voyages and in foxholes in the middle of war. We find those same stories going in and out, mouth to ear, finger to page. And now they are in movies and television and in other kinds of phosphor where they are taking on a new and very wild life which seems to multiply the readings — and mis-readings by the billion-fold. As the stories are passed along over and over and over again, it becomes less and less clear where they started, or indeed, if they shall ever end.

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## About the Author

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Jane Yolen is an author of children's books, fantasy, and science fiction, including *Owl Moon*, *The Devil's Arithmetic*, and *How Do Dinosaurs Say Goodnight?* She is also a poet, a teacher of writing and literature, and a reviewer of children's literature. She has been called the Hans Christian Andersen of America and the Aesop of the twentieth century. Jane Yolen's books and stories have won the Caldecott Medal, two Nebula Awards, two Christopher Medals, the World Fantasy Award, three Mythopoeic Fantasy Awards, the Golden Kite Award, the Jewish Book Award, the World Fantasy Association's Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Association of Jewish Libraries Award among many others.

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# Endnotes

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- [1] Jane Yolen, "America's Cinderella," *Children's Literature in Education* 8 (1977): 21-29. [↗](#)
- [2] Alan Dundes, "Nationalistic Inferiority Complexes and the Fabrication of Fakelore: A Reconsideration of Ossian, the 'Kinder-und Hausmärchen', the 'Kalevala', and Paul Bunyan," *Journal of Folklore Research* 22.1 (1985): 5-18. [↗](#)
- [3] Richard M. Dorson, "Folklore and Fake Lore," *The American Mercury*, March 1950, 335-342 (free PDF available: <http://www.unz.org/Pub/AmMercury-1950mar-00335>); Dorson, *Folklore and Fakelore: Essays Toward a Discipline of Folk Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976). [↗](#)
- [4] James Stevens, *Paul Bunyan* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1925); *Oregon Encyclopedia* entry on Stevens:  
[https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/james\\_stevens\\_1892\\_1972\\_/#.WD8eILrIdU](https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/james_stevens_1892_1972_/#.WD8eILrIdU). [↗](#)
- [5] Jerrold Hirsch's essay on Botkin's legacy from the website of The American Folklife Center: <https://www.loc.gov/folklife/botkin/hirsch.html>. [↗](#)
- [6] Dorson, "Fakelore," *Zeitschrift fur Volkskunde* 65 (1969): 60. [↗](#)
- [7] Dorson, *Folklore and Fakelore*. [↗](#)
- [8] "The Story of Tom Tit Tot," posted to the Educational Technology Clearinghouse's Lit2Go database, sourced from Hamilton Wright Mabie's early-20th century collection *Folk Tales Every Child Should Know*:  
<http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/134/stories-from-around-the-world/5297/the-story-of-tom-tit-tot/>. [↗](#)
- [9] Publication histories, reviewer blurbs and notes by Yolen are available for these four stories (and others) at [janeyolen.com](http://janeyolen.com): *Greyling* (<http://janeyolen.com/works/greyling/>); *Sleeping Ugly* (<http://janeyolen.com/works/sleeping-ugly/>); *Once A Good Man* (from the collection *The Hundredth Dove*, <http://janeyolen.com/works/thehundredth-dove/>); and *The Girl Who Cried Flowers* (<http://janeyolen.com/works/the-girl-who-cried-flowers/>). [↗](#)
- [10] "Notes on Strega Nona by Tomie," from Tomie dePaolo's official site:  
[http://www.tomie.com/books/spotlight\\_on\\_strega.html](http://www.tomie.com/books/spotlight_on_strega.html). [↗](#)
- [11] D. L. Ashliman's collection of folktales of Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 565:  
<http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0565.html>; *American National Biography Online* entry for Virginia Haviland: <http://www.anb.org/articles/16/16-03930.html>. [↗](#)

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