Child as Story-Maker[1]

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When I was five, my parents tell me, I regaled them with rambling, disjointed stories of my adventures with Snaky the Rattlesnake, my "invisible" friend. My mother described how amazed she was that a small child could spin out such involved narratives. I assumed that my older brother had found other ways to express his creativity—but now I wonder.

Shortly after my first child began spontaneously creating his own original stories at roughly the same age—five—I heard a presentation on children's stories by Brian Sutton-Smith.[2] I began to understand that I was not, after all, a child prodigy, but merely passing through an exciting developmental stage of childhood that we all experience, in one way or another. I suppose my brother must have kept his stories to himself.

In the early 1980s two particular storytelling incidents with my second child, Rachel, excited my curiosity as a folklorist with a primary interest in adults as story-makers. In order to document Rachel's stories, I had to shift roles from mother to scholar: while listening to and recording the stories and later preparing academic papers on them, I was aware that ethical concerns entered the situation. The delicate balance between my position as subjective parent and objective scholar colors the background of this writing.

There are already studies of children at various ages telling stories: these present a broad spectrum of ages and genres, the emphasis being on the development of verbal skills (See Sutton-Smith; Pitcher and Prelinger; Chukovsky). Each of these studies has been carefully conceived and carried out, and each includes abundant examples gathered from dozens of children over a stretch of time. Sutton-Smith examines the developmental stages of children as verbal artists, while Pitcher/Prelinger and Chukovsky emphasize psychological interpretations. Chukovsky in particular insists that children have a deep need for fantasy and create their own even in the absence of external literary models. He also notes what he calls "the linguistic genius" of the child, who does not merely copy any adult models that are available but instead "introduces critical evaluation, analysis, and control," even as early as two years of age (Chukovsky 9).

Obviously such conscientious approaches are needed for any meaningful generalizations to be made on children as storytellers. The stories I offer here, in contrast, were told by one child over a very limited time period in an uncontrolled environment. This serendipi-

tous collecting was not part of a planned study, nor central to my overall work on folk narratives. My modest intent was to describe how one young teller composed two narratives using diverse elements and how she herself responded to these events. However, the question of ethics, as relevant to incidental collecting as it is to other contexts, sheds new light on this topic.

I have been acutely aware of my accountability as a folklorist, as well as a parent, in using stories that are by right the property of the teller. When I was asked to contribute a paper to a recent folklore panel on ethics, "The Folklorist's Responsibility to the Child," I thought immediately of my earlier descriptions of Rachel's storytelling. The result is a re-view of the context and process of a child's story-making and the complexities of interaction between folklorist and informant. In working with children we need to be respectfully aware of ethical concerns that arise from our "objective" scholarship. What is this folklorist's responsibility to this child, and how was it negotiated in the two-year period covered by Rachel's storytelling activities?

From the beginning I asked her permission to record the stories and to use them as part of my research. I cannot take full credit for this, since Rachel herself was acutely aware that these stories "belonged" to her and reminded me of this fact every time the matter arose. But at age five she had only the vaguest notion of what it meant to use her material for academic research. I was surprised-and encouraged-by Rachel's closing comment on the taped variant of her first story. She concludes with "That's the end," and then adds cheerily, "And hello to all your students." She understood even before I did that I was not merely recording her story as a proud parent; I had no plans to examine her story at that time, but I did indeed use it as an example for students in my folklore classes.

The two stories I introduce here, the legend of "Loon Man and Bone Woman" (told at age five) and the anecdote of "The Men With Hats" (age seven) struck me as unusual. (The titles were chosen by Rachel.) I had just begun examining contemporary storytelling by adults and was sensitive to the dynamics of verbal creativity. I had also told folktales in a number of Winnipeg schools and was intrigued by occasional children willing to respond with stories of their own-but children did not become the focus of my narrative studies. Thus my initial interest in Rachel's storytelling was a general curiosity with no serious intent to transform her into an informant.

I had heard many of her spontaneous creations over the years, but these two had qualities that awakened the folklorist in me. They were fuller in their development and told with greater assurance, perhaps because they were each based on stories that Rachel had experienced orally. Because I had also heard them I could see more clearly how Rachel functioned as an expressive artist, using or discarding elements of the originals to produce her own narratives.

She firmly claimed them as her own creations, establishing self-consciousness as an artist and also recognition of her responsibility as an entertainer. She was aware that she was not merely discoursing for a sympathetic ear, but consciously seeking to create coherent stories for which I happened to be a listener. This is much clearer in her second story, "The Men With Hats," told in the presence of an older brother and later to an adult friend.

Let us look at each story within the context of its telling and then consider the ethical questions raised by publishing this article. Rachel, now seventeen and quite fiercely aware of her rights, has again given her full permission to use her material, though she asked why I was still working on "those old stories."

"Loon Man and Bone Woman"[3]

In 1981, I was making lunch for the two of us when Rachel began a story about a man who became a loon. At this age she was in the plot stage of storytelling discussed at length by Brian Sutton-Smith (1981). At first "Loon Man" seemed to resemble her other rambling tales with no fixed characters and a loosely connected series of events, but I soon caught the thread of a coherent narrative that took shape as I listened: Loon Man became a well-defined protagonist who set off in search of his missing bird wife and children, stolen by Bone Woman. Aided by four intimidating giants and a leviathan pike, he arrived at Bone Woman's "eggloo" just in time to rescue his family from being cooked for supper.

Her spontaneous narrative seemed to resemble what Sutton-Smith calls "folkstories," original narratives that "are not the same as folktales, but share common elements with them" (Sutton-Smith 1). I was intrigued by the literary sophistication of her story (which she very firmly claimed as her own) and asked if she could tell it again, not expecting her to be able to repeat it fully since all previous stories had been once-only events; she not only agreed, but permitted me to tape the retelling. I was surprised that she was able reproduce it accurately, and even improved on it as she went along. The story had a stronger beginning, a better motivated middle, and a more fully resolved conclusion; the characters and action remained stable, not shifting as I had expected. It had all the features of a completed narrative that had been consciously thought out, prepared, and rehearsed.

Given the finished nature of the story and her ability to reproduce it, I thought she might have heard it in her kindergarten class, but when I asked where she had learned it, she answered with a slightly indignant tone, "I made it up." Her unambivalent claim to original ownership intrigued me so I asked how she got the ideas for the story. Without speaking she pointed to the wall

behind me, where I found a colored print by Canadian Native artist Jackson Beardy. There, sure enough, was Loon Man—or more accurately, a loon who seemed to be battling a large fish; four domed shapes sat above them on the top left of the print, but there was no sign of giants or of Bone Woman and her "eggloo." She explained that the four domes were where the giants lived (in fact they are symbolic thunder-clouds in Beardy's print) and that Bone Woman and her house had been destroyed by Loon Man, so they were not in the picture.

But if the giants and Bone Woman were absent from the print, did they spring from her imagination or from an outside source? When I asked, she reminded me that we had seen a puppet play based on the Inuit legend of "Kivioq" in which a hunter marries a bird woman who flies away one day. He follows after her and meets a threatening giant, a huge pike, and a cannibalistic Bee Woman, whom he defeats.[4] Rachel told me that she had not enjoyed the play because it was "too scary" and added, "my story was better." Why? Because it had no puppets, and "it had a better ending." Rachel reunites Loon Man and his family, while in the puppet play Kivioq's Goose Wife and children refuse to return with him. Rachel's variant was also less violent and threatening without losing dramatic impact.

In sorting out how she composed and repeated her story on the spot by imaginatively bringing together an Inuit legend, a Cree print, and her own reworking of plot, character, and motivation, I was able to see in miniature the interaction of text, texture, and context. With her permission I presented a paper at the 1984 American Folklore Society meeting ("At Home in the Field"), came home, and filed it away.

"The Men With Hats"

Two years later I again happened to be present when Rachel tried a very different kind of story, a narrative joke. A joke is a very challenging genre, as its success depends on the precision of the wording and the successful delivery of the punch line. Up to this time Rachel had only told simple one-line jokes with no plot line to remember.

In the spring of 1984 a few adult friends gathered at our home for an informal afternoon of conversation and joke-telling. Rachel, age seven, moved in and out of the room as she went about her own affairs. I was not aware that she was even present when the following joke was told by a woman already known in our circle as an irreverent jokester:[5]

> Two Sikhs wearing turbans are challenged at Heaven's gates by St. Peter, who asks each, separately, a question. The first is asked what would happen if he lost one eye and then the other,

> to which he responds that he would be half blind and then totally blind. St. Peter allows him to enter Heaven, then questions the second man about what would happen if he lost one ear and then the other. He responds (having heard the first answers but not the questions) that he would be half blind and then totally blind—because his turban would slip down over one eye and then the other. St Peter, impressed, lets him in as well.

I was putting Rachel to bed that night, a time when we often shared casual stories, when she offered to tell the joke "about the men with hats." She surprised me by repeating the joke with absolute accuracy, making only one change from exotic turbans to prosaic hats. I complimented her on her good memory and said good night.

The next morning she offered to tell "that joke" again before going off to school, this time in the presence of her older brother who was not normally appreciative of her attempts at joke-telling. As I prepared breakfast, she introduced an entirely original joke based on the pattern of the one she heard the previous day:[6]

> There were two kids getting ready for school and their mother said, "I want to ask you two questions first. You first"
> So the first boy went in [to the kitchen] and the mother said, "What would happen if I gave you only half your breakfast?" "I'd be half hungry." "So, what if I didn't give you *any* breakfast?" "I'd be totally hungry." "O.K., you can go." "Just a minute. I want to say bye to my brother." "So she let him." So he went in and he whispered, "The first answer is half hungry and the second one is totally hungry. Bye!" So then the mother asked the second one, "What would happen if I turned the radio down?" "I'd be half hungry." "Well what would happen if I turned it all the way off?" "I'd be totally hungry." "Are you crazy? Why would you be hungry?" "Well, if you were so busy turning the radio on and off you wouldn't have time to make me breakfast" So she let him go too.

My son and I both laughed, and Rachel seemed embarrassed by the total success of her performance, responding by saying, "that was just a silly joke."

When they left for school, I sat down and wrote out her text, and thought again of "Loon Man and Bone Woman," also told while I was preparing a meal-that is, a casual rather than a formal setting, with my attention directed elsewhere rather than focused on her. As folklorist rather than mother, I noted that she was able to change the text without losing the original joke pattern, but at this point I had nothing more to say about the process.

It took a third and unsuccessful retelling of this joke to fully reveal her understanding of her own creativity and to bring my folkloric curiosity to full life. Some weeks after the breakfast performance she was sitting with me and another friend, a man whom she felt entirely comfortable with and whom she knew to be a joke teller himself. He had just told a joke, and she uncharacteristically offered another; "Here's one *I* made up," she said proudly, apparently buoyed up by her previous successes. She used the kitchen setting again and remembered that the success of the joke depended on the questions and answers:

> This mother is making breakfast for her two kids, I think, and she had to ask them some questions before they went to school. So she said to one, "What would you do if I made you stay home from school today?" "I'd be dumb." "Well what if I made you stay home for a whole week?" "I'd be dumber." [The teller realizes that she will have difficulty developing this question and reveals her discomfort nonverbally by pausing, grimacing, shifting her weight, as she tries to figure out what to say next.]
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> Well, so she says, "You can go to school now." "I have to tell my brother something first," and he runs into the living room and says "The answers are dumb and dumber." And he goes away. So then she asks the other kid, "What would happen if I took away your books?" "I'd be dumb." "What would happen if I took away your pen and paper?" "I'd be dumber."

She does not bother to end the joke with the "You can go now" closing, but simply stops, pauses, and comments, "Well, that wasn't very good, was it!" This was a rhetorical rather than an actual question, and we ALL laughed—-not at the joke but at her acknowledgment of its failure.

I realized that her failure—and her recognition of it—was a clearer demonstration of creativity than her successes had been. I could see how she was using structure to build her new narrative, and I also understood how she had matured as a performer by accepting her responsibility to complete the story even when she understood that it was not going to work-and by gracefully acknowledging her failure.

Later that year I asked her permission to use these three storytelling events for a paper to be given at the Canadian folklore meeting, and she agreed-after asking me who would be there and ascertaining that no one she knew would hear her joke.[7]

My initial interest was in Rachel's gradual recognition of herself as a conscious performer with a responsibility to herself as artist and to her listeners as entertainer. Now, several years later, I have tried to reframe these experiences with the idea of addressing the ethical problems raised in this

Panel—MY responsibility to HER. I began by showing Rachel, now 17, the abstract for the 1993 AFS panel and asking her to read what I'd written up to that point, explaining that she had complete control over what was to be included (I had already received permission to reuse the stories). I also asked her to add her own responses. It was my intention to encourage her to be an active collaborator rather than a passive informant. She promised to read what I had written, but never went beyond the abstract. "That's old stuff," she said when I urged her to give me a response.

It has been helpful for me to reframe my work with Rachel in this altered perspective: if I had not been aware of the significance of our subtle role shifts from child and mother to informant and folklorist, it would have been impossible to reframe the present article.

It has also been a challenge to maintain perspective because of the split focus of this article. On one hand it is an example of oral creativity, and on the other it is a commentary on ethical relations between researcher and child. There is obviously an advantage to being parent, teacher, or anyone else who is in steady contact with children on a long term basis. The child is familiar as both a human being and a creative, expressive individual. This is a subjective position given the privileged connections between the adult and the child. On the other hand, an academic researcher who may see a child only a few times has the advantage of objectivity, since personal connections are secondary to research interests. Scholarly training prepares the viewer to examine the young artists and what they create without the potential drawbacks of subjective personal relationships.

I have enjoyed the challenge of attempting to be both parent and researcher, trying to find a balance between subjectivity and objectivity. What has guided me is the central issue of ethics, which can be even more critical when one is dealing with children who are close and familiar. It is hardly a unique situation, given the ground-breaking work of father/scholar Piaget, but the central issue remains the same: the child and the creations of the child must be as fully respected and protected from exploitation as those of any adult. As I noted earlier, I cannot take full credit for treating Rachel and her stories with consistent respect; she seemed to understand from the very beginning that her voice was her own possession and managed to let me know that she was aware of her rights. If she had at any point withdrawn her permission, there would be no article.

I leave Rachel's stories with a sense of incompletion similar to that expressed by Pitcher and Prelinger, who conclude:

> We feel vividly how our analyses and interpretations have fallen short of doing justice to or even comprehending the complexity,

> the richness, and the literary quality, poetry, and beauty which many of the stories contain (240).

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As I wrote these final words and asked again if Rachel would read this paper and comment, she said, with more than a touch of 17-year-old sarcasm, "I don't need to read this again—I *made* the stories." She added that she expected a percentage of any royalties I received. While in this case it was a deliberately ironic request (she has learned that academic royalties are not impressive), it might have been less ironic if I were indeed earning money from a book of children's folklore.

"And," Rachel might add, "hello to all *your* students."

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Notes

1. This is a slightly revised version of the paper I presented at the 1993 AFS meeting in Eugene, Oregon. I am indebted to C.W. Sullivan III for requesting it; and also to Mary Louise Chown, Nathaniel Stone, and Carol McGirr for their responsive readings.

2. By coincidence Sutton-Smith's presentation was at the 1976 AFS meeting in Philadelphia, which I attended with three-month-old Rachel, the subject of the present article. Sutton-Smith's paper, "Structural Parallels Between Children's Creative Activity and Children's Folklore," seems to be a bridge between his initial work on children's games and play and his later work on storytelling by children.

3. The title was suggested by Rachel after the fact, in recognition that the taped telling had become a formal rather than a casual storytelling event and seemed, to her, to require a proper title.

4. "Kivioq" was performed by the Manitoba Puppet Theatre in 1981, with realistic and accurately costumed puppets. It was not in any way a "precious" or diminished telling of a complex and challenging Inuit legend. Rachel was not the only young child in the audience who found it disturbing.

5. Since this was an informal storytelling event the joke was not recorded. It is summarized from memory and checked with the original teller, who also gave her permission to include it here.

6. I wrote it down immediately after she left for school, trying to recreate her exact wording as well as I could and checking it with her on her return.

7. "The End of the Story" was presented at the annual meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada in Winnipeg in 1984.

Works Cited

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