Laissez les Bon Temps Roulez!

Recommended Children's Picture Books on Southern Louisiana and the Gulf Coast Regional Cultures

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Introduction

Hurricane Katrina focused national and international attention on the Gulf Coast and inspired many to discover or re-discover its unique cultural groups, such as the Cajuns and Creoles. The impact of this catastrophic event was undeniable in an even more global way. It impacted (and still does) all aspects of life for Gulf Coast dwellers: the economy, health care, government and politics, and our focus here—education. For example, since Katrina, educators around the country have had to meet the educational needs of young evacuees placed in their schools and classrooms. And teachers who were able to return to schools in the Gulf Coast were required to devise innovative ways to address learners who lost most, if not all, of their material belongings and worse, experienced the loss of beloved family members.

Whether or not they work directly with Hurricane Katrina survivors, teachers may want to enrich their curricula by presenting the region's peoples who reveal the many threads of our nation's cultural tapestry (Cross & Aldridge, 1989). Fortunately, there are an increasing number of children's books that have been inspired by the diverse but overlapping cultures found in the Gulf Coast region—Louisiana's African-American, Cajun, and Creole cultures (Leeper, 2003; Webre, 1988). The books mentioned here would be most appropriate for students at the elementary and early middle school levels. And even students who are not from Louisiana can find much to enjoy with these delightful books. Several genres are represented, including traditional literature, concept books, informational books, historical fiction, memoir, and biography.

For this article, we will briefly discuss the intertwined Cajun and Creole histories and cultures. Then we will provide examples of high quality trade books that would be an asset to any elementary and middle school reading/language arts curriculum. The books were chosen using authentication strategies suggested by Norton (2003; 2005). For example, she recommends looking at authors' personal, professional, and academic backgrounds, referring to highly regarded sources like multicultural children's books awards and checklists, and sharing books with individuals from the group being studied. She also highly recommends using the *Sequence of Multicultural Literature Study*, a process that helps readers better identify authentic depictions of a group's culture. The first step in the sequence involves learning about core values by reading the group's oral literature—myths, folktales, legends, and so on (Norton, 2003; 2005).

The books for this article have been divided into the following categories: a) books about the Gulf Coast region (with special emphasis on the state of Louisiana and New Orleans); b) books about the annual *Mardi Gras* celebrations; c) books about Louisianans of African descent; and d) books about Cajuns and Creoles. We conclude with a number of educational activities that were either drawn out of or inspired by these recommended books.

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Cajun and Creole Culture and Traditions

Cajun culture is as vibrant as the colors that adorn the capuchon worn at Mardi Gras. It is as rich and spicy as the food that has become popular all over the country. It is a culture filled with music and traditions spun from a web of ethnicities. Influences of Acadian exiles and other ethnicities have created a unique blended lifestyle for much of Southern Louisiana. Cajuns make up a significant portion of southern Louisiana's population, and the region now known as Acadiana includes 22 parishes with Lafayette at its heart. In Cajun country, the distinctive dialect heard is rooted in the French language. But the geographic location of Cajuns has also been critical in determining their lifestyle. Those who were located near water adapted to fishing, hunting, and trapping lifestyles. Those who settled inland farmed crops of rice

or sugar cane and raised cattle.

Like the unique language of Cajuns, the music, food, and traditions are equally distinct. Southern Louisiana cuisine has gained a reputation for being spicy and strongly dependent on frying; people living in Southern Louisiana like to say that while others eat to live, they live to eat. The popularity of Cajun food presents an opportunity to investigate how greatly this cuisine has become commercialized as well as the cultural and economic processes that have accompanied this commercialization (Ten Eyck, 2001). This potential offers a chance for Cajun culture to be shared with the greater majority. An item of necessity like food is also crucial to defining a sense of culture. It simultaneously produces and is a product of economic and cultural forces. Ten Eyck (2001) asserts that the increasing popularity of Cajun cuisine has generated economic rewards for those who know how to prepare food in authentic Cajun style. This represents an avenue to the wider world and a resource for preserving Cajun culture. Although the differences between Cajun and Creole food have been distorted, Cajun food is typically characterized as more seasoned, spicy, and hearty. Cajun dishes often include wild game, rice, and local ingredients.

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Cajun music is rooted in the traditions of French-speaking Catholics of Canada, with the fiddle and accordion as the major instruments, but it has also been influenced by the diverse blend within these peoples and their local traditions. New Orleans, with its blend of Creole and Cajun culture, would prove integral to the development of jazz.

Folk rituals and traditional beliefs in a Cajun healer or *traiteur* have been passed from generation to generation, as have mysteries and stories of werewolves. However, many Cajuns practice Roman Catholicism and observe its religious traditions. The distinctive *Courir de Mardi Gras* held in the small town Mamou is similar to the *La Chandeleur* or *Candlemas* by the Acadians in Nova Scotia. Just as modern day Disneyland emerged from the older models of the World's Fair and the amusement park, contemporary festivals in Louisiana have historical precursors in parish (county) and state fairs, as well as in the seasonal celebrations of rural people (Bankston, 2000). Fairs are designed to meet the needs of an agricultural economy, but festivals are dedicated to major aspects of Cajun culture, particularly food and music. In 1998, 17 of 46 festivals were dedicated to products from the environment (wildlife, oysters, crawfish, frogs, peppers) and crops (sugarcane, rice, cotton, herbs), and 14 were dedicated to processed products with an emphasis on pork and seafood. The remaining third were mostly dedicated to Cajun music (Festival de Musique Acadienne, Accordion Festival). In 1999, the state of Louisiana dedicated its 300th anniversary year—and a special brochure—to the FrancoFete, a yearlong celebration of its French heritage with an emphasis on Acadians who planned to meet by the thousands at the Congres Mondial (Louisiana Office of Tourism, 1998; 1999).

Cajun culture, like other marginalized cultures, faces multiple pressures toward assimilation. Some Cajuns fear that evolution within Cajun culture is for all intents and purposes assimilation at work. They seek to preserve elements of a traditional Cajun culture, and they object to the introduction of certain new elements. They believe, first of all, that a traditional, authentic Cajun culture can be identified and, secondly, that it should be maintained. Implicit in this view is the widespread fear that cultural change means assimilation or cultural death. On the other hand, some argue that Cajun culture has long survived by adapting to and accommodating its social and cultural environment, as well as by incorporating new elements that increase buoyancy and the culture's power to survive (Mattern, 1998). Today, Cajun traditions and the Creole culture seem to overlap in many areas. The current traditions and their respective cultures stand strong as both groups attempt to pass the heritage on to younger descendants. Many hope they will both maintain longevity and vividness for generations to come, as has been the case thus far.

Historical Definitions

Creole

The term *creole* originates from the Portuguese *crioulo*, a word used to describe a slave brought up in an owner's household. Criollo was later used by Spanish colonists in the New World to describe the children of parents raised in the colonies. But the French adopted *creole* and used it generally to refer to anyone native or born in Louisiana or the West Indies. The descriptor, however, was also used in Louisiana and the West Indies to distinguish a native-born slave from an imported slave. *Creole*, in whatever form, was indeed a term used in different ways by Spanish, French, and Caribbean peoples who migrated to Louisiana. With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and the subsequent influx of Anglophone settlers from the young American republic—in which most of its citizens were cultured by predominantly Eng-

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lish traditions—many Creoles used the term to distinguish between themselves and the newly arrived Americans (Trépanier, 1991). Whites and free and French-speaking Blacks would continue to describe themselves as Louisiana Creoles if they or their families carried on French traditions in an increasingly American society, but Creoles did enter the slaveholding class and would distinguish themselves from Anglo Americans based on traces of French culture, language, and heritage, or by the practice of Catholicism. During the twentieth century, *Creole* would increasingly refer to French-influenced people of color, yet Whites who trace their French heritage to before the arrival of the *Acadiens* still use the term. Often well-established families with connections to high society, both Black and White Creoles continue to take pride in their historical French Louisiana roots (Long, 1980).

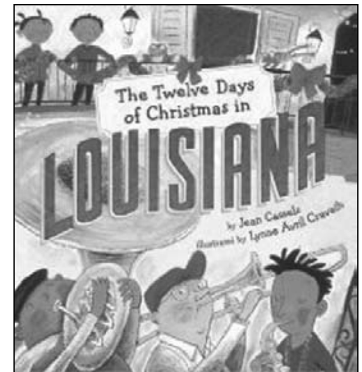
Cajun

When French Canadians of Nova Scotia left following the British takeover in 1755, they sought refuge in the remaining bastion of French culture in the New World—Louisiana. When the *Acadiens* arrived, native Louisiana Black and White Creoles, American émigrés, and French-speaking Indians distinguished themselves from these largely White, rural, and often-poor *Cadiens* in economic and cultural terms (Borders, 1988). The term *Cajun*, as they came to be called, may have possibly derived from *Acadien* as a derogatory slurring akin to *Injun* and Indian, or more simply, from an inability of the English-speaking settlers to pronounce the French *Cadien*. While Cajun has become an acceptable, even revered cultural identifier, it was once a xenophobic, classist derogation for poor, White Acadian émigrés. It would eventually develop in the region into a term similar to *hillbilly*, and until the 1970s calling an individual *Cajun* was a regional equivalent to "White trash" (Trépanier, 1991).

In the late 1960s however, Governor John MacKeithen began calling for the preservation and promotion of the French heritage of Louisiana. The 1968 Louisiana state legislature organized the Council of the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) and its president, James Domengeaux, declared its mission of making Louisiana the United States' French window to the world. CODOFIL designated the area of Southern Louisiana "Acadiana" and consequently identified Louisiana French culture with the Cajun émigrés. On the trail to the Louisiana governorship he later won in 1972, Edwin Edwards embraced the term *Cajun*, and campaigned as such, employing Cajun to include all Louisiana people of French descent or with French heritage. CODOFIL and Governor Edwards's definitions increasingly gained popular acceptance both within and outside of the state, but Black and White Creoles as well as French-speaking Indians continued to recognize the historical tradition of defining Cajun as a particular White cultural group. Though the state government attempted to unify its diverse cultures with French heritage under one official cultural identifier, it failed to account for differences in self-identification as well as complex historical, geographic, socioeconomic, and racial distinctions (Trépanier, 1991). This begs the question: Does one define oneself, or is one defined by others? In addition, while we highlight the historical foundations of singularities between people, we feel it necessary to remind our readers as well as ourselves to recognize our differences as positive aspects of a greater human culture.

New Orleans and Louisiana Children's Books

Cassel, Jean. ***The Twelve Days of Christmas in Louisiana***. New York: Sterling Publishing Co., 2007. 32 pp. Illus. by Lynne Avril Cravath. ISBN 13-978-1-4027-3814-2, $9.95 (pb). Gr. Pre-K–3.



This colorful concept book is based on how Christmas is celebrated in Louisiana today. It is told in two ways. On the left side of the book opening, there are a series of letters written between two cousins, Rosalie and Paul. After their first correspondence, Rosalie sends Paul an airline ticket so they can begin their exploration of Louisiana together. Between December 26th and January 6th, Paul writes a letter to his parents each day. Through his letters, fascinating facts about Louisiana are revealed. We learn for example that the Causeway Bridge is the longest highway over water in the world. Paul also mentions other places of interest, like the Audubon Zoo, Jackson Square, the Myrtles Plantation, and Breaux Bridge.

On the right side of each opening, there is a delightful Louisiana-inspired version of the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas"—"On the third day of Christmas, my cousin gave to me … 3 marsh ducks, 2 baby gators and a pelican in a cypress tree." Cravath's cartoon-like illustrations add a lighthearted feel to the book. On the final pages, a section entitled "Louisiana: The Pelican State" provides interesting nuggets of information about the capital, state abbreviation, state songs, and famous Louisianans. On the last page, the author discusses the impact of Hurricane Katrina.

Delancy, Elaine M. ***My Trip to New Orleans: From A to Z***. [n.l.]: Experience Excellence LLC, 2007. 40 pp. Illus. by H.I.M. ISBN 978-0-9795451-0-8, $7.95 (pb). Gr. K–4.

The events surrounding Hurricane Katrina inspired this alphabet book. For every letter, interesting information related to New Orleans and its tragedy is provided: "J is for Jazz: Cultural music that originated in New Orleans." The author also reveals her hope that Katrina's survivors never forget their beloved home and traditions. *My Trip to New Orleans* is a loving remembrance for those who had to leave the area and a great introduction to those who have yet to discover its wonders.

Downing, Johnette. ***Today Is Monday in Louisiana***. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2006. 32 pp. Illus. by Deborah Ousley Kadair. ISBN 978-1-58980-406-7, $15.95. Gr. Pre-K–3.

Today Is Monday focuses on seven regional foods and their related traditions, one for each day of the week. These are some of the most popular culinary delights of the region, particularly of New Orleans. Some of the foods mentioned are *beignets*, fried catfish, crawfish, gumbo, jambalaya, po' boys, and red beans and rice. There is even a recipe for red beans and rice at the end of the book. The heartwarming illustrations of children coming to their grandma for lunch each day add to the enjoyment of this book.

Mardi Gras Children's Books

May the fish get legs and the cows lay eggs
If ever I cease to love
May all dogs wag their tails in front
If ever I cease to love

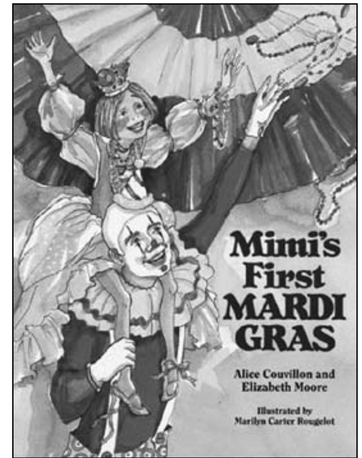
If ever I cease to love
If ever I cease to love
May the moon be turned to green cream cheese
If ever I cease to love
("If Ever I Cease to Love," the nineteenth-century novelty song that became the official anthem of Mardi Gras)

Coil, Suzanne M. ***Mardi Gras!*** New York: Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1994. 48 pp. Illus. with photos by Mitchell L. Osborne. ISBN 0-02-722805-3, $15.95, Gr. 2 and up.

Coil's book is chock-full of facts and photos about Mardi Gras traditions. Divided into 13 brief chapters with titles like "Mardi Gras: How Did It All Begin?" and "Costumes and Masks," it concludes with an index on the last page for quick reference to specific content in the book. Coil addresses Mardi Gras history in the New World and in Louisiana, the origin of the krewes, floats, and the Mardi Gras Indians. Vivid color photos of costumed parade-goers are included. The author also includes a chapter about the *Courir de Mardi Gras* celebrated by Cajuns of rural southern Louisiana.

Couvillon, Alice, and Elizabeth Moore. ***Mimi's First Mardi Gras***. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1992. 32 pp. Illus. by Marilyn Carter Rougelot. ISBN 0-88289-840-X, $6.00 (pb). Gr. K–5.

Mimi's First Mardi Gras helps the reader learn how Mardi Gras is celebrated differently in New Orleans and in Cajun country. Mimi, a little girl growing up in New Orleans, dreams of being a beautiful princess in the celebration. In order to answer her many questions about the annual event, Mimi's parents explain its history and traditions over a breakfast of French doughnuts known as *beignets*. They dress in colorful costumes and attend the annual parade where the crowd catches trinkets, beads, and doubloons (old Spanish coins) from the floats. After the parade, Mimi and her family meet up with cousins and other family members to have a feast of gumbo, jambalaya, and king cake. But when Mimi goes to visit her cousin, Jean-Paul, she is introduced to Cajun Mardi Gras. Although Mimi is from New Orleans, she is unfamiliar with the spectacle of *Courir de Mardi Gras* or the "running of Mardi Gras." With her Aunt Conette and Uncle Rabbitt she watches the procession of masked men on horseback who go from house to house to collect ingredients for the town's big gumbo feast.



The book is colorfully illustrated and filled with new vocabulary words. The story is an entertaining way for children to learn about this cherished tradition and the different ways it is celebrated. It is a great introduction to the differences between contemporary and traditional Cajun festivities surrounding Mardi Gras.

Gabbert, Lisa. ***Mardi Gras: A City's Masked Parade***. New York: Rosen Publishing Group/PowerKids Press, 1999. 24 pp. Illus. with photos. ISBN 0-8239-5337-8, $18.75, Gr. K–4.

Gabbert's work, especially designed for emergent or beginner readers, is divided into 10 two-page chapters, each dealing with one aspect of Mardi Gras, such as Mardi Gras krewes and floats. Each brief chapter consists of one full-page color photo and one page of text. Difficult words are printed in bold and provided with phonetic spellings in parentheses. Highlighted words are defined within the context of the page and in a helpful glossary at back. The last page is an index. This book can serve as a springboard for a larger unit.

Heinrichs, Ann. ***Mardi Gras: Holidays, Festivals and Celebrations***. Chanhassen, MN: The Child's World, 2006. 32 pp. Illus. by Jan Bryant-Hunt. ISBN 1-59296-578-4, $24.21. Ages 9–12.

Heinrichs' series volume is divided into eight three-page chapters consisting of subjects like "A French Carnival" and "The Krewes of New Orleans." Colorful, highly stylized pictures with brief text can serve as a fun and festive introduction to Mardi Gras. Italicized French terms are spelled out both conventionally and phonetically. Difficult English words are printed in bold red and defined in a glossary at back. At the bottom of each page is an italicized sentence that summarizes the information in the text above. Sidebars provide additional historical information. At the

end of book there is a page entitled "Joining in the Spirit of Mardi Gras," which lists three easy art-related activities. Children can have fun making a king cake or Mardi Gras beaded necklaces. Lyrics of "If Ever I Cease to Love"—one of the most beloved Mardi Gras *chansons*—are included. A glossary, references, and an index are provided.

Hoyt-Goldsmith, Diane. ***Mardi Gras: A Cajun Country Celebration***. New York: Holiday House, 1994. 32 pp. Illus. with photos by Lawrence Migdale. ISBN 978-0-8234-1184-9, $17.95 Gr. 4–6.

This work is a photo essay based on the Savoy family who has lived in the Cajun community of Eunice, Louisiana, for over seven generations. Cajun Mardi Gras is seen through the eyes of 12-year-old Joel Savoy and his Cajun music band called Les Gens de la Prairie. Music created and played by the talented Savoy family makes up a big part of the book, as Joel's parents are professional Cajun musicians as well. Every Saturday morning from 10 to noon, jam sessions are held at the Savoy Music Center on the family's property. Words and music to "La Danse d'Mardi Gras" by Dewey Alfa and a recipe for chicken gumbo are included. A very helpful glossary, index, and list of Joel's favorite Cajun musicians can be found at the back.

McConduit, Denise Walter. ***D.J. and the Zulu Parade***. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1994. 32 pp. Illus. by Emile F. Henriquez and Lucien C. Babarin, Jr. ISBN 1-56554-063-8, $15.95. Gr. Pre-K–3.

On Mardi Gras, seven-year-old D.J. experiences the excitement of being a page of the queen in the Zulu parade, the oldest Black parade in New Orleans. D.J. is at first apprehensive, but he eventually warms up to the African-American Mardi Gras tradition. His mother provides the historical background of the parade and also addresses the sensitive subject of black face-painting. The author, who is a native of New Orleans, shows the pride most people from the Crescent City feel for this particularly African-American aspect of Mardi Gras.

Tatum, Colette LeBlanc. ***Mardi Gras: An Alphabet Parade***. Hoover, AL: Four Children Publishing. 2008. 32 pp. Illus. by Jeanne LeBlanc. No ISBN. $12.00. Gr. Pre-K–3.

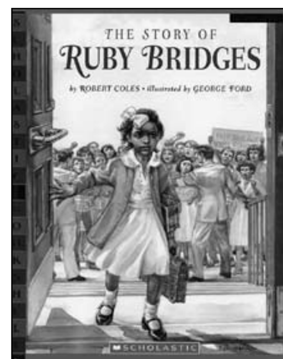
This straightforward alphabet book with a Mardi Gras twist was written by a former elementary school teacher from the Gulf Coast region and is based on her own fond memories of Mardi Gras. An author's note is provided in the back of the book to provide additional information about her experiences with the annual celebration. Jeanne LeBlanc, Tatum's sister, provides dynamic illustrations that add a sense of excitement to the text made simpler for young readers' own exploration.

Vidrine, Beverly B. ***A Mardi Gras Dictionary.*** Lafayette, LA: Sunflower Press, 1997. Illus. by Patrick Soper. ISBN 1-56554-332-7, $12.00. Gr. 4–8.

A Mardi Gras Dictionary is another colorful and informational alphabet book. For each letter of the alphabet, there is usually more than one item related to the Mardi Gras celebrations. For example, the terms *debutante, den*, and *doubloons* are used to inform the letter D. The last page is dedicated to a helpful pronunciation guide. The author is a former schoolteacher who grew up in Lafayette, Louisiana. The illustrator is also a current resident of Lafayette.

African-American Louisiana Children's Books: Biography

Coles, Robert. ***The Story of Ruby Bridges***. New York: Scholastic, 1995. 32 pp. Illus. by George Ford. ISBN 0-590-57281-4, $16.99. Gr. Pre-K–3.



This true story follows the historic tale of Ruby Bridges, a six-year-old girl who experiences systematic racism when she is chosen to be one of the first African-American children to attend an all-White elementary school. As she approaches Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans for the first day of school, she is confronted by an angry mob. However, the young Ruby exhibits bravery as she faces the crowd with her head held high. Ruby even prays for the angry mob, asking God to forgive them. Accompanied by armed federal marshals for protection every day, Ruby spends most of her school days as the only student at school, as the other children's parents protest integration by keeping their children at home. Eventually, as Ruby begins second grade, two boys and then eventually the rest of the students re-enter the school. This singular event led to the eventual integration of the entire New Orleans school system.

Coles grabs readers' attention by asking them to put themselves into Ruby's shoes. Children and adults as well are reminded that it is often ordinary people who change history. Ford wonderfully captures the characters' expressions and emotions with beautiful, realistic watercolor illustrations. This book could be used to teach both language arts and social studies. From a pedagogical point of view, the well-written text is replete with multisyllabic words, past tense verbs, and concrete examples of cause and effect.

Miller, William. ***Rent Party Jazz***. New York: Lee & Low, 2001. 32 pp. Illus. by Charlotte Riley-Webb. ISBN 978-1-58430-025-0, $16.95 (cl); 978-1-60060-344-0, $7.95 (pb). Gr. 1–5.

Set in 1930s New Orleans, this book depicts the tradition of the "rent party," held to save unemployed families from eviction during the Great Depression. Sonny, a boy who already works before school delivering coal, must find a way to pitch in more when his single mother is laid off from her job at a canning factory. Not wanting to quit school to take a second job, Sonny confides in a well-known street musician, Smilin' Jack, and the two of them organize a rent party, complete with jazz music, to keep the youngster and his mother in their home.

The lively story and illustrations, along with a historical note, portray an African-American self-help tradition that developed in communities in the South and New York City during the Depression, as well as the way in which these parties contributed to the evolution of jazz.

Schroeder, Alan. ***Satchmo's Blues: The Jazz of Our Street***. New York: Random House Children's Books, 1999. 32 pp. Illus. by Floyd Cooper. ISBN 978-0-440-41472-8, $6.99 (pb). Gr. 1–5.

On the tough streets of New Orleans, a small boy named Louis Armstrong survives by scavenging through trash dumpsters, running errands, and searching for any way to earn money. But he also has a dream—to play the brass cornet horn. At night he peeps under the door of Economy Hall and listens to some of New Orleans' best jazz bands. One day Louis sees a horn in the window of a pawnshop for five dollars. Even though that was a lot of money at the time, Louis is determined to find a way to buy it. Every day he plays an imaginary horn until he is finally able to have one of his own.

Satchmo's Blues is an inspiring look at Armstrong's tough childhood. It also offers a first glimpse into what helped mold his musical genius. Young Louis Armstrong learns that any dream can come true with healthy doses of hard work, perseverance, and self-confidence. Schroeder's text is flush with the culture of New Orleans. Equally important are Cooper's vibrant illustrations reflecting the richness of New Orleans. This combination of strong text and illustration makes the book a welcome introduction to Louis Armstrong and the New Orleans jazz experience.

Cajun/Creole Children's Books

Artell, Mike. ***Three Little Cajun Pigs.*** New York: Dial Books, 2006. 32 pp. Illus. by Jim Harris. ISBN 0-8037-2815-8, $16.99 Gr. K–3.

Set in rural Louisiana, *Three Little Cajun Pigs* is based on the more familiar and traditional "Three Little Pigs" folktale but with a Cajun twist. This version begins when Mama Pig tells her sons Trosclair, Hibodeaux, and Ulysse to go out on their own and begin building their houses. They quickly learn to build a brick house after encounters with Claude, an antagonistic alligator with a tail that likes to destroy less sturdy dwellings. Luckily, Ulysse's brick home saves his brothers and foils the gator's plans of filling his belly. The rhyming text, along with the Cajun flavors added throughout, create a novel approach to the familiar tale.

Artell, Mike. ***Petite Rouge. A Cajun Red Riding Hood***. New York: Puffin Books, 2001. 32 pp. Illus. by Jim Harris. ISBN 0-8037-2514-0, $15.99. Gr. K–3.

In *Petite Rouge*, based on "Little Red Riding Hood," the heroine is a duck sent by her mother to take some gumbo and *boudin* (Cajun sausage) to her sick Granny. Petite Rouge is instructed to use the *pirogue* (flat canoe) and long-pole to get herself and her cat through a swamp full of alligators. When she finally arrives at Granny's, she soon realizes something is amiss. Claude the Gator, now dressed like Petite Rouge's grandmother, is pretending to be asleep in her grandmother's bed! Petite Rouge and her cat throw *boudin* covered in hot sauce at the gator. It sends him running out the door back to the swamp. Granny, Petite Rouge, and her cat can then sit down to eat their heart-warming meal.

Artell has taken a well-known tale and again added a Cajun kick to it. The story is uniquely written in rhyme and is in a Cajun dialect. This humorous tale is wonderfully supported by Harris's detailed watercolor illustrations. His depictions of the characters' facial expressions are especially well done. The rhyming text, dynamic illustrations, and dash of local flavor all work well together in the retelling of this classic. Ancillary materials help make the retelling accessible to a wide audience. On the verso, Artell writes "A Brief History of the Cajun People," and on the next page, there is a glossary of Cajun words and idioms with phonetic pronunciations.

Brodt, Burton P. ***Four Little Old Men: A (Mostly) True Tale from a Small Cajun Town***. New York: Sterling Publishing, 2005. 24 pp. Illus. by Luc Melanson. ISBN 1-4027-2006-8, $14.95 Gr. 1–4.

Dumbo, Cap, Bubby, and Rigger are all elderly men from the same Cajun town searching for something exciting to do besides rocking in their rocking chairs. They come together to play a Cajun card game called *Bouree* but soon find other activities to keep them busy. The problems they encounter and solutions they devise invigorate the old men. Through their adventures, they eventually realize that the two things missing in their lives are friendship and remaining active.

At several points in the book there are notes explaining an expression or word that non-Cajuns might have trouble understanding. Illustrator Melanson adds an imaginative touch with his whimsical depictions of the story's events, sure to spark the imagination of readers both young and old.

Hebert-Collins, Sheila. ***Blanchette et les Sept Petits Cajuns: A Cajun Snow White***. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company,

2002. 32 pp. Illus. by Patrick Soper. ISBN 978-1-56554-912-8, $15.95. Gr. K–5.

When Marie Gaudet, an envious voodoo queen, learns about the beautiful Blanchette, she convinces swamp creatures under her power to lure the young beauty away. However, Blanchette's innocence and loveliness cause the minions to lead her to the home of seven little Cajuns. Using the swamp water in place of the traditional mirror, Marie Gaudet learns that her nemesis is indeed still alive. The voodoo queen disguises herself as a kindly old Cajun woman and brings along a batch of poisoned *beignets*. Heeding her seven companions' warnings, Blanchette does not answer the knock at the door but falls ill after eating the *beignets* left on the windowsill. The little Cajuns place their friend in a sealed glass box, and when a handsome plantation owner, Monsieur Cossee, comes, he breaks the spell. Moving the glass box, he knocks loose the poisoned *beignet* in Blanchette's mouth. Cossee proposes to Blanchette, and the voodoo queen's jealousy over this romance leads to her doom.

This Cajun version of "Snow White" is very readable and should be a nice alternative to the more familiar version. Also included are pronunciations and translations of Cajun and French words and a recipe for Blanchette's Chicken and Sausage Jambalaya.

Hebert-Collins, Sheila. ***Jolie Blonde and the Three Héberts: A Cajun Twist to an Old Tale***. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1999. 32 pp. Illus. by Patrick Soper. ISBN 978-1-56554-324-9, $15.95. Gr. K–5.

Based on the classic folktale "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," *Jolie Blonde and the Three Héberts* follows the adventure of Jolie Blonde (pretty blonde), a traditional character from Cajun and Creole folklore. The three bears of the American version are now three humans known as the Héberts (pronounced AY-bair). Mama Hébert makes gumbo that is left to cool while the family goes for a *pirogue* (boat) ride. Jolie Blonde then stumbles across their home, and the story unfolds much like the original version.

This retelling is made special by the inclusion of a few different elements. A cassette of Cajun music is included if the book is purchased from a bookstore. Traditional music in the background adds to the read-aloud experience. Readers and listeners can get a real taste of Cajun/Creole culture by making the gumbo recipe thoughtfully provided in the final pages. On most pages, words and terms in Cajun dialect are defined. And children who are already familiar with the story of Goldilocks can make predictions or complete a Venn Diagram to represent the similarities and differences between the two versions.

Hebert-Collins, Sheila. ***Petite Rouge: A Cajun Twist to an Old Tale***. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1997. 32 pp. Illus by Chris Diket. ISBN 1-56554-310-2, $15.95. Gr. K–5.

Petite Rouge is another Cajun version of "Little Red Riding Hood" set in the Louisiana bayou. Diket, a native of Thibodaux, Louisiana, provides black-and-white and color illustrations. A line underscores the picture and sparse text found on each page, under which a Cajun French glossary is located for words found in the story above. This delightful, almost nostalgic retelling includes a pronunciation guide entitled "A Note to the Storyteller" and features a recipe for alligator sauce piquant.

Hebert-Collins, Sheila. ***T'Pousette et T'Poulette: A Cajun Hansel and Gretel***. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2001. Illus. by Patrick Soper. 32 pp. ISBN 978-1-56554-764-3, $15.95. Gr. K–5.

T'Pousette et T'Poulette is a Cajun version of the well-known Grimm brothers' tale "Hansel and Gretel." The Cajun Hansel and Gretel are relocated to the Louisiana swampland with their father, a poor fur trapper, after his beloved wife Marie dies of swamp fever. The children's new stepmother, Lelia, tries to get rid of them by sending them on various outings, hoping they will lose their way. The stale breadcrumbs left by the children are eaten by hungry swamp denizens, and they arrive at an unusual cottage built of *beignets*, pralines, and *gratins* (fried pigskins). The starving children are deceived by an evil witch who feeds them for the insidious purpose of eventually eating them herself. The clever children find a way to get free of the witch and find a treasure chest, which rescues the family from their impoverished circumstances. The book concludes with a recipe of La Sauce Patate from Jack Brignac.

Reneaux, J.J. ***Why Alligator Hates Dog: A Cajun Folktale***. Little Rock, AR: August House, 1995. 32 pp. Illus. by Donnie Lee Green. ISBN 0-87483-412-0, $15.95. Gr. Pre-K–3.

This tale is about how everyone except for Dog was scared of M'su Cocodrie. After chasing Rabbit and falling down the alligator's hole, Dog has to come up with a clever plan to save his life. This humorous tale is embellished by Green's rich acrylic paintings. The full-page illustrations of the swamps on the flyleaf set the tone. Reneaux, who is a native Cajun, begins the book with "A Note on Cajun Dialect," a glossary of Cajun words used and concludes with more background information in "About the Story."

Salley, Coleen. ***Epossumondas***. San Diego: Harcourt, 2002. 32 pp. Illus. by Janet Stevens. ISBN 0-15-216748-X, $16.00. Gr. Pre-K–3.

Epossumondas, a possum child beloved by both his mama and auntie, is another fine twist on the Noodlehead story. Each day when Epossumondas goes to visit his auntie, he is given a gift to take home with him. Because of his youthful foolishness, he wrecks (or almost wrecks) each of the presents from his aunt—a piece of rich gold cake, a stick of butter, a sweet little puppy,

and a loaf of bread. After his mama sees the damage caused by her son's carelessness, she provides a lesson on taking care in his work. Epossumondas's application of the previous day's instructions for the next day's delivery of gifts leads to several humorous episodes in which he interacts with characters like Alligator, Raccoon, Nutria, and Armadillo.

Young children will undoubtedly identify with the innocent mistakes of the youthful protagonist. Stevens's warm illustrations nicely match the humorous text. Salley's Storyteller's Note on the final page gives background into the Noodlehead folktale told in many different cultures and countries. This humorous tale could be enjoyed as a read-aloud or storytelling.

Salley, Coleen. ***Epossumondas Saves the Day***. San Diego: Harcourt, 2006. 40 pp. Illus. by Janet Stevens. ISBN 0-15-205701-3, $16.00. Gr. Pre-K–3.

Epossumondas Saves the Day is another book in this series. The title character must come to the rescue after his friend, auntie, and grandmother are each swallowed by a huge snapping turtle when they go to the store to buy a box of *sody sallyraytus* (colloquial for baking soda) to make his favorite strawberry shortcake for his birthday. Salley's delightful use of language adds to the enjoyment of the story. Stevens's humorous illustrations are done in mixed media on watercolor paper. On the last page there is an author's note, where Salley explains this is a variation of a folktale told throughout the South for generations. She also writes about Laurel Valley on the banks of Bayou Lafourche in southern Louisiana, where the tale is set. It is America's largest surviving sugar plantation and has been fully restored by several organizations, including the National Park Service.

San Souci, Robert. ***Cendrillon: A Caribbean Cinderella***. New York: Aladdin, 2002. 36 pp. Illus. by Brian Pinkney. ISBN 0-689-84888-9, $6.99 (pb). Gr. K–4.

Cendrillon: A Caribbean Cinderella is a tale loosely based on the traditional fairy tale. Cendrillon is a poor servant girl who lives with her father, stepmother, and stepsister following the death of her mother. Her father, who is intimidated by Cendrillon's stepmother, allows his daughter to be treated like a servant. Luckily, Cendrillon has a godmother who looks out for her and ensures that she is able to attend the birthday gathering for Paul—a handsome, well-mannered young man—where she and Paul fall in love. Much like the traditional tale, Cendrillon leaves her shoe on the step and Paul chases after her. This story demonstrates a cultural adaptation of a classic fairy tale. The scratch paintings and pastel color illustration add a new twist to this familiar tale.

San Souci, R. ***Little Pierre: A Cajun Story from Louisiana.*** San Diego: Harcourt, 2003. 32 pp. Illus. by David Catrow. ISBN 0-15-202482-4, $16.00. Gr. K–3.

Little Pierre is the youngest of five children. He works very hard, but the same cannot be said for his older brothers. His brothers put together a plan to get rich but unknowingly get themselves into trouble. Little Pierre comes up with an ingenious plan to save them all, thereby accomplishing the goal his big brothers failed to attain. Catrow's infusion of humor into his illustrations adds to the entertainment value of the book.

San Souci, Robert. ***Six Foolish Fishermen***. New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 2000. 36 pp. Illus. by Doug Kennedy. ISBN 0-7868-0385-1, $14.99. Gr. K–3.

This is the story of six friends named Jules, Jacques, Jean, Ti-Paul, Philippe, and Pierre who live in the bayou country of Louisiana and love to go fishing. Since this is a Cajun version of the Noodlehead tale, they go through several foolish predicaments, including one in which they each take a head count and become frustrated when they only come up with five instead of six fishermen. Kennedy's cartoon-like illustrations reinforce the tomfoolery. A helpful author's note, which discusses the Noodlehead story variants, in addition to a glossary and other resources on Cajuns and their culture are located on the last page.

San Souci, Robert. ***The Talking Eggs***. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2005. 28 pp. Illus. by Brian Pinkney. ISBN 978-1-58980-286-5, $15.95. Gr. 2–3.

This delightful tale is a Louisiana Creole take on the traditional Rose Blanche tale. Two sisters have very different personalities. One is nice and caring; the other is selfish and mean. When the two sisters encounter a local witch-woman, one is rewarded for her humility and obedience. The other is punished because of her disrespect and greed. The warm, almost nostalgic watercolors by Pinkney add a richness to this famous story. And the always-thorough San Souci provides an author's note to explain the several variants of this folktale.

Thomas, Wes. ***Down the Crawfish Hole***. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company. 2004. 32 pp. Illus. by Wes Thomas. ISBN 1-58980-163-6, $15.95. Gr. Pre-K–3.

While fishing on the bayou, Maurice sees a little blue crawfish drop a watch as he tries to escape the ravenous old Toad Queen who wants to eat him. The boy goes down the crawfish hole in hot pursuit and embarks on an adventure similar to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. This Cajun-inspired fantasy is now populated with growth-changing pralines, bowls of gumbo, talking armadillos, and a wide-grinning opossum who provides helpful information. Thomas, who is a native of New Orleans, writes and illustrates an interesting variation on Carroll's original fantasy.

Thomassie, Tynia. ***Feliciana Feydra LeRoux: A Cajun Tall Tale***. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2005. 28 pp. Illus. by Cat Bowman Smith. ISBN 978-1-58980-286-5, $15.95. Gr. 2–3.

This whimsical tall tale that is part of a series revolves around a feisty female protagonist, Feliciana Feydra LeRoux who comes from a large Cajun family. She is especially close to her grandfather, but because she is a girl, she is not allowed to go on the nighttime alligator hunts with her male relatives. One evening she decides to go on a hunt by herself. She winds up showing the power of a determined young female in the dangerous swamps of Louisiana. Written in Cajun dialect and illustrated with charming pictures, this is a treat for young and old alike. The first two pages are helpful for becoming familiar with the cultural context of the story. The author's note provides extensive information about the Cajun people and their culture. The quite extensive one-page glossary and pronunciation guide is also appreciated.

Thomassie, Tynia. ***Feliciana Meets d'Loup Garou: A Cajun Tall Tale***. New York: Little Brown, 1998. 28 pp. Illus. by Cat Bowman Smith. ISBN 0-316-84133-1, $15.95. Gr. 2–3.

Thomassie's Feliciana LaRoux is having a bad day. From the time she wakes up, she fusses and misbehaves. Frustrated and upset with her brothers, Feliciana cuts off one of her pigtails. Could the day get any worse? Have her hasty actions upset the legendary d'Loup Garou—a Cajun werewolf that eats children who misbehave? Left alone with her brother as a punishment, she lies awake wondering if the howling she hears outside her window is the d'Loup Garou coming to eat her or if it is her brother playing tricks on her. Written in a Cajun dialect, this colorfully illustrated tall tale is sure to teach anyone a lesson on good behavior.

Trosclair, Howard Jacobs. ***Cajun Night Before Christmas***. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company. 2007, 48 pp. Illus. by James Rice. ISBN 978-0-88289-940-4, $15.95. All ages.

The classic night before Christmas tale is irreverently revised with a traditional Cajun Louisianan flair in Trosclair's picture book. This story is complete with a muskrat-clad Santa pulled on a skiff by eight friendly flying alligators. The pitter patter of gator feet on the roof, Santa landing on hot coals when he comes down the chimney, and the explanation of Santa's rosy cheeks add a fun new twist to this familiar tale.

The engaging dialect used throughout adds to the enjoyment of this popular text. Rice's illustrations are rugged and sketchy with vibrant colors to evoke the rural aspect of Cajun life. Trosclair's work would be a great asset to any elementary school classroom to study a specific cultural group's version of a common tradition.

Literature-Based Activities

Iko Iko

Iko Iko
Iko Iko ah day
Jockomo feeno ah na nay
Jockomo feena nay

Hey now (hey now)
Hey now (hey now)
Iko iko ah day
Jockomo feeno ah na nay
Jockomo feena nay

My spy boy and your spy boy
sittin on the bayo
My spy boy told your spy boy
I'm gonna set your tail on fiyo

My ma reine and your ma reine
sittin on the bayo
My ma reine told your ma reine
I'm gonna set your thing on fiyo
(Popular Mardi Gras Indian Chant)

There are many activities that can accompany these delightful books (Cornett, 2003; Jones, 2000). In the book, *Kids Around the World Celebrate! The Best Fests and Festivals from Many Lands*, an entire section is devoted to the New Orleans Mardi Gras (pp. 54–62). Besides background information about important aspects of the celebration like the Carnival Krewes, the Black Indians, and Mardi Gras foods, there are directions to create carnival beads and king cake. For a reading methods course, one co-author had her students create Mardi Gras masks and beaded necklaces and make their own king cakes in addition to reading some of these books. She also gave them Louis Armstrong's lyrics to "What a Wonderful World" and information on the "Second File."

The authors of this article encourage you to share these many books and activities with pre-service teachers, colleagues, and elementary and middle school students. Students can develop mandated academic skills while learning about a vibrant cultural group that continues to enrich our nation. As the Cajuns and Creoles often say, "Laissez les bon temps roulez!" or "Let the good times roll!" Let's be able to say this hopeful phrase even in the midst of the diverse, high-stakes, time-constrained classroom environments faced by most teachers today.

Language-Arts Activities				
Title	**Author Illustrator**	**Year of Publication**	**Literature-Based Activities**	**References**
Down the Crawfish Hole	Wes Thomas	2004	Children can create a Venn Diagram comparing the book to a child's version of "Alice in Wonderland."	Gunning, 2008 ; Rothlein & Meinbach,1991; Tompkins, 2009
Epossumondas	Salley, Coleen; Janet Stevens	2002	Students can create a variety of graphic organizers to represent story sequence and/or plot.	Gunning, 2008; Rothlein & Meinbach,1991; Tompkins, 2009
Mardi Gras: An Alphabet Parade	Colette LeBlanc Tatum; Jeanne LeBlance	2008	Colette Tatum writes about how her elementary students read the book and share king cake and beads.	Tatum, 2008
My trip to New Orleans: From A to Z.	Delancy, Elaine; H.I.M.	2007	Children can create an alphabet book on special aspects of their town or city.	Gunning, 2008; Tompkins, 2009
Petite Rouge: A Cajun Red Riding Hood	Mike Artell Jim Harris	2001	Children can convert Cajun French into Standard English.	Ball & Heath, 1993; Cross, K. & Aldridge, J. (1989)
The Three Little Cajun Pigs	Mike Artell; Jim Harris	2001	Children can create a Venn Diagram comparing this book to the traditional "Three Little Pigs" folktale	Gunning, 2008; Rothlein & Meinbach,1991; Tompkins, 2009

Music and Fine-Arts Activities				
Title	**Author Illustrator**	**Year of Publication**	**Literature-Based Activities**	**References**
Blanchette et les Sept Petits Cajuns: A Cajun Snow White	Hebert Collins, Sheila; Patrick Soper	2002	Teacher can play cassette of Cajun music in background while reading story aloud to set the tone.	Borders, 1988; Fallen, 1995; Levene, 1993; Smardo, 1984
Cendrillon: A Caribbean Cinderella	San Souci, Robert. Brian Pinkney		Students can make their own scratch paintings using pastel colors.	Wright, 2003
Mardi Gras!	Coil, Suzanne M.; Mitchell L. Osborne.	1994	Students can create: Mardi Gras masks in traditional colors of green, gold and purple; Mardi Gras Indian figures from a paper template; Their own "Krewes" and have a Mardi Gras parade	Merritt, 1990; Wright, 2003; See websites in reference List
Mardi Gras: A Cajun Country Celebration	Hoyt-Goldsmith, Diane; Lawrence Migdale	1994	Children can: Listen to Cajun and zydeco music; Sing lyrics to the Dewey Alfa's "La Danse d'Mardi Gras;" Have their own "jam session"	Borders, 1988; Fallen, 1995; Levene, 1993; Smardo, 1984
Mardi Gras: Holidays, Festivals and Celebrations	Heinrichs, Ann; Jan Bryant-Hunt	2006	Children can: Make a king cake with recipe provided; Create a Mardi Gras beaded necklace and; Sing lyrics of "If I Ever Cease to Love" the most loved Mardi Gras.	Bogrow, 1980; Borders, 1988; Fallen, 1995; Smardo, 1984
Satchmo's Blues	Alan Schroeder Floyd Cooper	1996	Children can: Listen to some of Louis Armstong's many recordings; Sing lyrics to "It's a Wonderful World; " In the classroom or around the school, do a "Second File" to the music "When the Saints Come Marching In."	Ball & Heath, 1993; Borders, 1988; Fallen, 1995; Levene, 1993; Smardo, 1984; Wright, 2003

Cooking Activities				
Title	**Author Illustrator**	**Year of Publication**	**Literature-Based Activities**	**References**
Blanchette et les Sept Petits Cajuns: A Cajun Snow White.	Hebert Collins, Sheila; Patrick Soper	2002	Teacher and students can create "Blanchette's Chicken and Sausage Jambalaya."	Bogrow, 1980; Jones, 2000; Morrow, 1983
Epossumondas Saves the Day.	Colleen, Salley; Janet Stevens	2006	Teacher and students can create Epossumondas' favorite dessert in class---their own simple strawberry shortcakes.	Bogrow, 1980; Jones, 2000; Morrow, 1983
Jolie Blonde and the Three Heberts: A Cajun Twist to an Old Tale.	Hebert Collins, Sheila; Patrick Soper	1999	Teacher and students can create the gumbo recipe.	Bogrow, 1980; Jones, 2000; Morrow, 1983
T'Pousette et T'Poulette: A Cajun Hansel and Gretel	Hebert Collins, Sheila; Patrick Soper	2001	This book concludes with a Jack Brignac's recipe for "La Sauce Patate."	Bogrow, 1980; Jones, 2000; Morrow, 1983
Petite Rouge: A Cajun Twist to an Old Tale	Hebert-Collins, Sheila; Chris Diket	1997	This book features a recipe for alligator sauce piquant.	Bogrow, 1980; Jones, 2000; Morrow, 1983
Today is Monday in Louisiana.	Downing, Johnette; Deborah Ousley Kadair	2006	Teacher and students can make and eat some of the foods mentioned like red beans and rice and po'boys.	Bogrow, 1980; Jones, 2000; Morrow, 1983

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Resources and Websites: New Orleans

CocoJams: Mardi Gras Indian Chants
http://www.cocojams.com/mardi_gras_indian_chants1.htm

Mardi Gras Indians are African-American men from the New Orleans area who belong to specific competing groups (referred to as "tribes" and gangs). During a few specific times of the year, the tradition is for members to "mask up" (put on usually hand-sewn intricately feathered and beaded suits) and chant while promenading through the streets of New Orleans. The devastation of Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita in August/September 2005 has resulted in massive relocations of African Americans and others from New Orleans to other cities within the United States. One perhaps not so minor cultural consequence of this relocation is that there are likely to be significant changes to (if not the complete end of) the pre-Katrina New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian culture. This Cocojams page contains examples of and commentary about Mardi Gras chants.

The Historic New Orleans Collection & the Williams Research Center
533 Royal Street
The French Quarter
504-523-4662
www.hmoc.org

Louisiana African Heritage Trail
www.louisianatravel.com

New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau
www.neworleansinfo.com

New Orleans Online
http://neworleansonline.com/

Resource and Website: Cajun Country

Lafayette Convention & Visitors Commission
www.lafayette.travel
1-800-346-1958 23

Gail Singleton Taylor is a native of New York City who has had the pleasure of visiting the Crescent City on three occasions so far. Her first visit was two years before Katrina. Because she is a multicultural teacher-educator with a special interest in the role of culture in the education of African-American students, New Orleans with its rich spiritual, cultural, artistic, historical, and gastronomic offerings calls her to return again and again. She is Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Old Dominion University.

Kamala V. Williams is a native Texan. Although a lifelong neighbor to the southern Louisiana culture, she became inspired with the spirit of its people while working at her church shelter after Hurricane Katrina. She is a doctoral candidate at Texas A&M University in the Department of Teaching, Learning and Culture in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Urban Education. She is the coordinator for the Center for Urban School Partnerships at the University. Upon completing her doctorate, Kamala plans to continue her qualitative research on issues impacting urban students.

Daniel P. Kamienski has lived in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, for eight years. Although Daniel can trace his ancestry to French-Canadians in Quebec City during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, he himself was an émigré to Louisiana. While living there, he was exposed to the unique French, English, Spanish, and West Indian cultural melding, in addition to others, as modern Louisiana has become the home of increasingly diverse peoples from throughout the United States and the world. He recently received an M.S.Ed. from Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, and is considering returning to Louisiana to continue historical studies at Louisiana State University.

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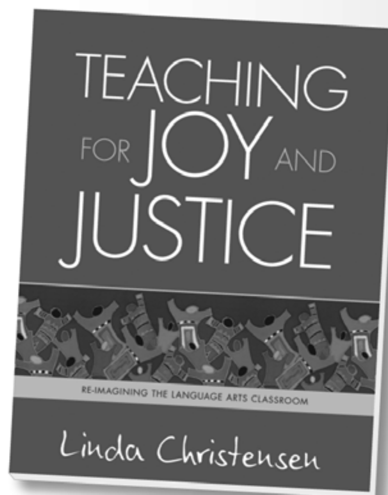

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The Challenges of Writing from the Inside

Lisa Madsen Rubilar

Much has been said about the challenges facing authors who write about a culture or community not their own. Some even believe that such writers have no right to venture imaginatively into a non-native world, an assertion with which I disagree. Not much is said, however, about the challenges facing authors who write from within their *own* community. In my experience, these challenges are just as great, if not greater, than those confronting the outsider. I've often faced these challenges in my own writing; but since reading Ayaan Hirsi Ali's powerful memoir, *Infidel*, I've been thinking about how these issues affect virtually all writers.

Ali begins her story as an "insider," a *hijab* (head scarf)-wearing girl in an observant Somali Muslim family. Before her story's conclusion she has become—in the eyes of her family and most of her early acquaintances—the embodiment of her memoir's title: an infidel. This transformation begins when her father arranges what he considers an amazing match for her with a countryman living in Canada. Rather than accepting his choice, Ali takes advantage of a stopover in the Netherlands to apply for asylum there. (That she did so under false pretenses she freely admits, although years later, in 2006, this revelation led to the collapse of the Dutch coalition government.) Once in the Netherlands, Ali begins to see her past, her culture, and her religion in a new light—and she finds little to recommend it. In fact, she loses her faith in God and becomes outraged by the Netherlands' apparent willingness to assimilate or overlook aspects of the Muslim way of life that she had been eager to escape. Her zeal to make her voice heard leads to the production of a film documentary about the plight of Muslim women, and the murder of her production partner by an Islamic extremist only energizes Ali further. Entering politics, she becomes an outspoken advocate of women's rights and decrier of a religion she believes is incompatible with the modern age, even in its less radical forms. While Ali begins her story as an insider, she finishes it from the opposite perspective. She has become the outsider looking in.

Reconciling the Irreconcilable

All of us possess an inner truth, a particular way of experiencing and interpreting the world. The task of every writer—at least the serious literary writer—is to bring to the page our particular truth as clearly as possible. Yet for writers who claim membership in and are loyal to a community, personal truth is closely linked with the worldview defined by that community, whether the community is based on religion, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or life-circumstances. But this connection to the communal vision creates an internal tug-of-war between two questions, which often have contradictory answers: *What do I owe myself?* and *What do I owe my community?*

I thought about this struggle as I read Ali's book, and realized that—while the story is about her life in the culture from which she came—she essentially tells it as a community *outsider*, as a *former* insider who has severed ties with her past. This perspective made it easy for me, a White, middle-class American woman, to relate to her distaste for an arranged marriage and to cheer her escape from a repressive way of life. But even as I cheered her escape, and even as I lauded her efforts on behalf of abused Islamic women, I recognized that she was meeting me *out here*, on my own Western turf, where I felt comfortable judging what she showed me *back there*, in the community and worldview she has disavowed.

"But this connection to the communal vision creates an internal tug-of-war between two questions, which often have contradictory answers: *What do I owe myself?* and *What do I owe my community?*"

What if, I asked myself, she *hadn't* left the community before writing the book? What if she still lived inside it, not just physically, but emotionally and psychologically? How would the book be different? Would it have helped me see the world from a perspective radically different from my own? Would she have been able to write it?

In Ali's case, maybe not. The act of lifting her pen might have been enough to place her outside the pale of her community. But I give her as the most extreme example of the issues facing almost any writer who belongs to a community that is significantly "other" than the secular Western "norm." By leaving her community, Ali bravely and forcefully answered the question *What do I owe myself?*; but leaving also allowed her to do so without reference to that other thorny question: *What do I owe my people?*

By saying this, I'm not in any way excusing the abusive behav-

ior Ali describes. In fact, she received so many death threats that she eventually felt obliged to move from the Netherlands to the United States. My point is that she writes from the perspective of someone who is no longer emotionally connected to her society. It is this emotional connection that provides the greatest challenge to writers practicing their art within the community framework.

Insider as Protector

Writers often feel a responsibility to protect their community from the scorn or misunderstanding of the outside world. They feel hesitant to air the dirty laundry of their culture. They worry about perpetuating stereotypes. They may bend over backward to portray members of the community in a positive light. This would not seem to be the case for Edwidge Danticatt, who is known for her explicit portrayals of Haiti's bloody history. Yet in a review of Danticat's 1998 novel, *The Farming of Bones*, Michael Upchurch (1998) writes,

> The trouble is that Danticat's storytelling invention has been inhibited by the respect she has for the novel's historical sources [i.e., the real-life past of her people]. It is surely telling that the prickly yet affectionate servant-mistress bond between Amabelle and Señora Valencia . . . feels more astutely observed than the relationship among Haitian characters, who are too uniformly noble to be entirely convincing.

Nevertheless in a profile of Danticat, Maya Jaggi (2004) points out that Danticatt's "loudest critics" are Haitian readers, "who have objected to her alleged betrayal of community 'secrets.'"

"Writers often feel a responsibility to protect their community from the scorn or misunderstanding of the outside world."

Finding themselves between this kind of rock and hard place, some writers don't write at all about their own culture and people. Instead, they remain silent on the very issues closest to their hearts. But race and culture aren't the only kinds of community about which writers can choose silence. Bebe Moore Campbell, best known for writing stereotype-busting books about African-American life, also explored a community that crosses racial, economic, and geographic boundaries: people who have experienced mental illness. While this is a biological condition, not a belief system or an ethnicity, those affected directly or indirectly by mental illness are bound together by their suffering. For many years, Campbell had avoided writing about this community to which her own family members belonged. In an interview with Tanisha Blakely, Campbell said, "I didn't talk about it [bipolar disorder] outside of the family, and I forbid anyone else talking about it." Campbell had to overcome this desire to hide the mental illness in her own family before she could write the last novel published before her death, *72-Hour Hold*.

It must be said, however, that sometimes there are life-and-death reasons to "protect" one's community through silence. Billie Jean Isbell, who wrote a fictionalized account of her years working as an anthropologist in Peru (*Finding Cholita*), said that she chose to write her story as a novel "to protect people I have interviewed from possible harm" (ix). The kind of harm she's talking about is physical and personal. Yet we have to admit that fiction, too, has often been used to justify generalized persecution of or bigotry toward minority populations. This is most often the fault of ignorant or antagonistic outsiders, but insiders are also capable of lazy, clichéd prose that perpetuates damaging stereotypes. If we care about our community, the risks associated with writing about it cannot be denied or glibly ignored. But silence is not the answer.

Insider as Panderer

Writers who vanquish self-imposed silence face another challenge, however: the temptation to pander to a generic communal vision. This is a grave risk indeed, as it threatens the essence of their art, the ability to develop their own particular vision.

For the insider—the one who was formed by, is immersed in, and genuinely loves a community—it can be difficult to see where one's love for one's people ends and where trying to please them begins. For authors writing romances for Christian publishers, the "need to please" (and not to shock or offend) is simply part of the job description. However, for literary writers who happen to be Christian, the question of what to put in and what to leave out is a tricky one. We're always asking ourselves, "Am I self-censoring? Or am I simply leaving out what is not essential to the story I want to tell?" As a practicing member of a Christian denomination (Mormon), I'm familiar with such second-guessing. I find myself asking, *Am I leaving out the topic of sex/abuse/violence because it's uncomfortable for me, and possibly for my friends/neighbors/family/fellow-believers, or because it's not essential to this particular story? Am I whitewashing, or simply telling the truth as I know it?*

I think of Graham Greene's book, *The Heart of the Matter*, which I recently took home from the library. Only a believing Christian could have written such a book. And yet the plot revolves around a lurid affair that ends in the murder of a potential tale-bearer and the suicide of the unfaithful husband. Greene obviously had no qualms about offending any Catholic readers who might pick up his novel. He simply did what his novel required. He placed his protagonist in an ever-ratcheting vise in order to explore the reality of damnation, divine grace, and the limits of

human love and forgiveness.

The Heart of the Matter is absolutely true to Greene's vision of the world, and it's also unashamedly Catholic. But in choosing to include adultery and violence in his plot, Greene risked (although I don't believe he succumbed to) another booby-trap to which insiders are prone: the exploitation of their community.

"Writers who vanquish self-imposed silence face another challenge, however: the temptation to pander to a generic communal vision."

Insider as Exploiter

There are very real market forces that encourage writers to focus on the salacious underbelly of their society. Once we insiders get past our fear of offending our peers or betraying them to uncomprehending outsiders, we risk buckling to that market pressure. Percival Everett rails against this kind of community exploitation in his novel *Erasure*. Why is it, his protagonist-author Thelonious Ellison wants to know, that African-American "street lit" receives billboard marketing, while novels written by an African American (himself) but set in ancient Greece go unnoticed by critics, bookstore buyers, and the general public—although when they are stocked, the books *are* for some reason located in the Black Literature section of the bookstore? Thelonious finds out when he decides to write an over-the-top, practically pornographic spoof of the genre called *My Pafology*, which promptly wins him a large advance plus prestigious literary prizes. While this story is fictional, the anger with which Everett wrote it is not, and neither is the phenomenon. Perversion, crime, drugs, and violence sell books! The temptation for writers to exploit the seamy and the sensational for financial gain or literary notice is ever-present, and especially for those with ties to a marginalized or minority community.

"There are very real market forces that encourage writers to focus on the salacious underbelly of their society."

The Myth of "The Representative"

Most of us belong to more than one community. For example, I identified myself earlier as part of the "Western, secular culture." This was the first vantage point from which I read Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel*. I simultaneously read it as a member of my gender community: I'm a female who believes that, as Hillary Clinton said, "Women's rights are human rights." At the same time, I read the book as a member of a religious community, one that often comes under fire for "repressiveness." It is my own experience of belonging to a misunderstood and sometimes-maligned Christian denomination that led me to wonder about the story Ali couldn't tell: the story of the believing woman in Islamic society. She couldn't tell it because her perspective is now that of an outsider. Only a woman still emotionally and spiritually linked to the community can do so.

"Most of us belong to more than one community."

Yet even if such a woman overcame her own silence; even if she relinquished the need to protect or please her people; even if she avoided becoming a generic mouthpiece for the communal script; even if she refused to exploit her insider status; even if she did all this, the story she told would not and could not *represent* her community. Her story would be uniquely hers. She could not assume—and neither should we, her readers—that she represents the hearts and minds of all women in her community. To pretend otherwise would be to lose once again the "particular truth" for which every writer strives.

The Antidote: The Truth

When I'm writing from within my community, do I owe *myself anything?* The answer, of course, is *Yes!* Do I ethically owe something to my community? The answer, again, is *Yes!* We don't live or write in a vacuum. We live in the real world, with real neighbors, real families, real human hearts and minds. The thing to remember is that my own heart and mind are as real as anyone else's. It is my devotion to "the truth as I know it" that comes nearest to resolving the insider's questions with their apparently contradictory answers. Because truth holds within it both courage and love—courage to see clearly; love to understand. When both are in play, it is hard to pander, whitewash, lie, or exploit.

Devotion to our particular truth and love for our community allow us to write as an insider, without betraying either ourselves—or those we care most about.

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Lisa Madsen Rubilar's fiction, essays and poetry have appeared in journals and magazines including *Publisher's Weekly*, *The Writer's Chronicle, The Carolina Quarterly, Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Exponent II, Wasatch Review International*, and *Brick*. She won the 2009 Fiction Contest sponsored by *Irreantum*, the literary journal of the Association for Mormon Letters. One of her stories, a finalist in Vermont College's *Hunger Mountain* fiction contest judged by Wally Lamb, appeared this spring in an anthology of Mormon fiction titled *Dispensations*, published by Zarahemla Books. She holds a bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University and an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. She lives with her family in Niskayuna, New York.

To read additional thoughts on the destructive effects of stereotypes, see Lisa Rubilar's article, "Snuffing the Flame: The Moral Implications of Stereotypes," in the October/November 2008 issue of The Writer's Chronicle, published by the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP).

Stories of Longing and Remembrance: The Role of Myth in Making Meaning

Patricia Goldblatt

Deep within every person, there is a desire to know where they belong. In an interview at Harbourfront in Toronto, Canada, South African author J. M. Coetzee elegantly and succinctly posed the questions: Where is home? And how do I get there?

> "From earliest times, people have set out on archetypal journeys and confronted trials that enabled them to better understand themselves and their origins."

From earliest times, people have set out on archetypal journeys and confronted trials that enabled them to better understand themselves and their origins. Whether suggesting the origins of an Oedipal complex or the unending struggles of an *everyman/everyperson*, theorists have considered and contemplated, searching out myths that make meaning for individual souls and societies. In considering the meaning of "myth," Merriam-Webster's online dictionary suggests divergent interpretations: an "usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon"; or alternatively, "a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone; especially one embodying the ideals and institutions of a society or segment of society." *Orpheus Lost* by Janette Turner Hospital and *The Gathering* by Anne Enright are two novels that implicitly and explicitly delve into the myths that ground self and societal behavior. Each narrative telling addresses the definitions presented above.

Unfolding part of the world view of a people or explaining a practice or belief

From the outset of *Orpheus Lost*, Turner Hospital alerts her readers that her tale will resonate with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. The title recalls for the reader love lost by Orpheus, the god of music, who descended into the underworld, is given a chance to rescue his love, but glances back. Unlike Lot's wife in the Bible who turns into a pillar of salt, Eurydice disappears forever. Having lost his chance to redeem Eurydice's love, Orpheus cannot barter further with the gods of the underworld. In ancient times, for example, 47–410 C.E. (Wikipedia), gods and goddesses were believed to control and maintain the harmony of life, with each presiding over a specific locale or location. These deities plotted and schemed, attempting to exert power over one another and the unfortunate humans who happened to anger them or even cross their paths.

Aware of the Orpheus nuances in *Orpheus Lost*, readers immediately identify the couple, Leela-May Moore from her town Promised Land, South Carolina, and Mishka Bartok from Daintree, Australia, as counterparts to Orpheus and Eurydice. As modern day lovers, they carry with them contemporary troubles that position them as pawns in their environments of political and economic unrest. Leela is a rebellious, brilliant, and promiscuous woman who has crossed the Mason-Dixon Line to escape her fundamentalist father, Gideon. She emerged from a backwater town, a kind of underground, and moved on from school math to pure mathematics to the math of music: she finds the ciphers and cryptic symbols "strangely beautiful" (Turner Hospital, 2007, 43). Reminiscent of the myth, many of Leela and Mishka's encounters occur in subterranean locales, even their initial meeting at Harvard University. Initially drawn to Mishka's music performed in the subway, Leela is aware that "[t]he tunnel smelled of monstrous decay ... the slightly dank odour of the steps as she descended ... the funky smell ... the subdued roar ...those haunting notes" (4–5). Mesmerized by the passionate playing of Gluck's *Lament of Orpheus*, Leela connects the performer with the legendary hero as she reflects,

> He has the eyes of Orpheus at the moment that Eurydice is bitten by the snake, or perhaps when he loses her for the second time, and when she is pulled back into the underworld, forever beyond reach ... (10)

In search of his father, Mishka is taken into the tunnels of Beirut's torture prisons. Later still, he is moved to deeper chambers erected beneath the flooded city of Baghdad where floors are damp, walls are covered with slime. Once more, Turner Hospital suggests the underworlds of Guantanamo Bay and Abu Graib with her descriptions of dank smells of mold, twisting labyrinth paths, bodies crashing and falling, voices reduced to "guttural rattles," and the raspy drags at air.

The roles of seeker and sought are conflated in *Orpheus Lost*. Leela is as intent on finding her love as Mishka is on discovering his roots, both moving through internal and external infernos in search of identity pieces to complete knowledge of themselves: one as son, the other as lover. Journeys in legends and myths are

predictable in the stages that take the protagonists from states of innocence to experience, usually accompanied by difficult tasks that will prove the ability of the seeker to confront, withstand, and conquer the doubt or demons surrounding their searches. In the end, enhanced knowledge of society and self is the reward.

In contrast to the outspoken Leela, Mishka's soul has been forged in a house of music, first playing the lyre, then studying the Middle Eastern oud, his father's instrument. Mishka explains that he communicates through his playing, "My music says everything" (23), he tells Leela, underlining his introverted nature when he confides to her, "I am in my music" (33). His mother's family are refugees from the Holocaust, loving and tight-knit, shadowy counterparts, recluses in a dark and dreamy castle-structure at the edge of a river. His story exudes ambiguities and unspoken mysteries: Why does his Uncle Otto never appear, but his music is present at sundown? And what of Mishka's absent father? Interesting and charismatic personalities, Mishka and Leela entrance the reader to unlock the enigmas that have propelled them into their erotic relationship. As characters burdened with multiple layers of history, name associations, and complicated lives, Mishka and Leela serve to illustrate the threads that conjoin individuals with myth.

"The roles of seeker and sought are conflated in *Orpheus Lost*."

A third character, Cobb Slaughter, also from the Promised Land, comprises an essential element in the novel. Like his father, he is haunted by war demons who have strangely manipulated his life like the capricious gods of times past, but it is Cobb's obsession with Leela that motivates his place in the narrative. Both Leela and Cobb have lost their mothers at a young age. Obsessed by Leela, Cobb remarks on her "*rapacious* curiosity" and how he had "adored her in secret back then" and how "she kept on gate-crashing his dreams" (41). Twinned with Leela, Cobb struggles with his powerful feelings of love and hatred for her. He too is a math genius, fascinated by codes, but unlike Leela's spontaneous understanding, Cobb's is plodding, perfect for performing acts of official intelligence-gathering and unlocking secrets in Mishka's past. He, too, will descend into underworlds, aware that he may have to sacrifice his self for his Eurydice, Leela.

Further, these three are inextricably bound, for Cobb, Leela, and Mishka all share cloistered upbringings, were reared by erratic and eccentric families, and are driven by pure languages; communicating in abstract symbols has turned them inwards and charged their imaginations. Each strives for an understanding of identity, a way of bridging outside worlds of chaos, politics, and terror with inner realities where the purity of art is the raison d'etre; and each seeks love, perhaps, with an unobtainable other. As the tale unfolds, each plays the Orpheus character of survivor and victim, confounding a traditional reading of the myth, hoping to understand the deep love that has been aroused through a pure passion.

Turner Hospital's novel seems to postulate that study of the pure and abstract, such as music, may be an unsuitable endeavor for mortals and those who seek it will be sacrificed. Relating to traditional myth, only gods were allowed certain kinds of knowledge; mere mortals were forbidden access and were punished for their quest. Mishka will discover his classmates and absent father have exchanged their musical instruments for tools of terror, never pausing to regret a violent choice. Betraying his son and former life, Mishka's father proclaims, "Beauty is dangerous ... it is a trap" (255). "Music is like the sexual power of a woman ... it must be crushed before it destroys" (256). Instead of fully formed humans, ranting characters spout cliches, presenting readers with stereotypes of killers and fundamentalist thinkers, people who have lost touch with the beauty of things ethereal that exists beyond the realm of conflicting politics.

However, painting people who do evil in unambiguous tones encourages readers to retreat into the polarized situations of either/or and black-and-white scenarios. To polarize in this way is to dismiss the complexities of humans and their societies, denying their diversity as well as their madness. Easy labels block compromise and the confrontation of terrible viewpoints and issues. Yet myths can provide the starting point to deconstruct cultures entrenched in stereotypical views and to provoke conversations to unlock the rigidity of accepting these cultures' views. In counterpoint to this theme of music's innate fragility, the myth instead promises that the language of music will, in spite of every false note, persist in human endeavor. We live the evidence as we turn on our iPods!

Interestingly, the Oscar-winning German film *The Lives of Others*, written and directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck in 2006, also presents an unfeeling and methodical ideologue who, unlike Mishka's lost father Marvan Rahal Abukir, is transformed when he is moved by a piece of music, ironically entitled "Sonata for a Good Man." The film's portrayal of music as transport to higher levels of purity and intensity of emotion recalls Orpheus's power to convey in feeling what words cannot and to override the ugliness of senseless deeds and actions committed by blinded avengers, whether terrorists, totalitarian institutions, or crazed gods.

So too, after Mishka is captured in Beirut, his fingers broken, his escape occurs when he enters his reverie of music. Paradoxically, the serpents that would destroy him have stimulated a rich alternate realm of feeling. Replete with the biblical struggle between Jacob and the angel of God, Mishka conjures a messenger from the Lord of Music. His struggle is described,

> Then Mishka seized hold of the radiant being and wrestled with him and music arose from their struggle and ... the oud touched the hollow of Mishka's thigh and Mishka was in great pain ... and the music of the spheres was all around him and he felt no pain at all. (57)

The scene is also reminiscent of the myth involving Dionysus and the spurned maenads who dismember Orpheus. It recalls the helplessness of humans before vengeful gods, reminding readers of Orpheus's detached head and lyre floating, still singing, reinforcing the idea that music endures and sustains, speaking of love beyond life to a place where suffering can be transformed. That inner word of feeling can withstand the torment of physical

pain so that beauty is shown to be timeless, persistent, and indestructible. Underpinning the story with echoes of the myth, the paradoxes of sacrifice and redemption soften the blows of horror as readers construe the story as a play of ideas intermingled with their own melodies and personal contexts. In the end, music/good triumphs over evil, sanctioning the original sacrifice of Orpheus. Humans will continue to own the right to enjoy and play music.

Although Turner Hospital evokes the myth of Orpheus, the archetypal journeys are set against contemporary times of terrorism. As in the Greek telling of the myth, there are many endings and possible interpretations.

A popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone

Similarly, the myth of family as the comfort and reassurance of existence is quickly destroyed as Veronica, the narrator of *The Gathering*, attempts to come to terms with her brother Liam's death and her tenuous sense of self. Her own life story stands as a microcosm for societies in the twenty-first century when old truths are banished by resurfacing memories that cast doubt on the pillars of society that formed them—family and church. Age-old myths that have perpetuated and structured society become riddles for both the stories' protagonists and readers as Veronica pierces, re-examines, and attempts to determine truths and untruths that inform her knowledge. Eventually, unthinkable acts become public, and as the victims relate their stories, societal *truths* are forever altered.

> **"In the end, music/good triumphs over evil, sanctioning the original sacrifice of Orpheus. Humans will continue to own the right to enjoy and play music."**

In *The Gathering*, readers revisit the concept of family as a loving supportive unit. If Mishka possesses the traditional traits of the questing hero Orpheus, so, too, does Veronica embody the notion of what a mother and a loving family should represent. Veronica Hegarty is a prototypical Irish wife and mother, financially stable with two small and loving daughters, a devoted husband, a suburban house, and a new Saab in the driveway. Veronica herself has deep feelings for her children, returning often to thoughts of her daughters, Rebecca and Emily, to ground herself in their daily lives and routines. Tenderly, Veronica reflects, "I do not think we remember our family in any real sense. We live in them, instead" (Enright, 2007, 66). Like Mishka, her feelings extend beyond the language of mere words, resonating deeply in the person herself.

Unable to completely disconnect the Hegarty family with narratives and myths of other Irish writers, readers are immediately conscious of the survival of family amidst abject poverty in Ireland and the facades of civility that have protected and extended the illusion that big families are safe and jolly sites for growing children. Popular narratives such as *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt also prepare readers for the struggles of hapless children born into large families. As the seventh child from the top and fifth from the bottom of 12, born in 1970, Veronica, straddles three worlds as she recounts her grandmother's life in 1925 and moves into her present day thoughts in 1992: she presents Ireland where concepts of family have changed and families of 12 are considered undignified and irresponsible.

Almost an alter-ego, Liam is only 11 months older than Veronica, in her mind a sort of premature twin. When school age Liam suggests that brother Stevie was smothered by their mother's pillow at a young age, Liam and Veronica laugh like conspirators, glad that there are less of them, aware of the ridicule that follows huge rambling families from church to school. Veronica, 39 at the time of the telling, is caught between divergent world views that permeate post-Catholic religious practices and economic shifts in Ireland. Veronica speculates,

> All big families are the same ...There is always a drunk. There is always someone who has been interfered with, as a child. There is always a colossal success ... There is a mysterious sister ... (Enright, 2007, 184–185)

With so many children, identity is often lost so that even good sibling relationships are similarly impersonal. "Ernest was always nice to me, growing up. We were just the right distance apart" (195). Veronica writes, "the great thing about being dragged up is that there is no-one to blame. We are entirely free range. We are human beings in the raw. Some survive it better than others, that's all" (195).

Veronica's conflicted feelings for her brother drive her further into comprehending herself: "Drink made him vicious, but even sober he could smell what was going on in a room, I swear it … because the place Liam worked best was under your skin" (54). She refers to him as a "terrible messer" whose problems were never something big,

> but always a hundred small things ... For someone who was blunderingly stupid most all of the time, my brother was very astute. And what he was astute about were other people's lives, their weaknesses and hopes, the little lies they like to tell themselves about why and whether they should ever get out of bed. This was Liam's great talent—exposing the lie. (124–125)

In trying to expose her own lies, Veronica tries to reconstruct her own and Liam's trajectory, obsessed with ferreting out the reasons for his suicide. Her narrative floats between present and past times, as she grapples to find the truth in her evanescent and fleeting memories against a background of family relationships.

Like a child who spends much of her time imagining by herself, Veronica creates word games and stories to amuse and distract herself: again, perhaps a ploy to gain quiet distance from her sprawling clan of siblings. A reflective storyteller, a ponderer, and a player with language, Veronica considers and toys with the names of places in England—Hayward's Heath, Wivelsfield,

Burgess Hill, Hassocks, "Names so silly and twee they must be made up" (41). She imagines herself into the facts of her past, beginning with her grandmother Ada who believed people did not change but were merely revealed. Veronica aligns herself with the flirtatious Ada, seeing her own large feet as a direct inheritance, but also reliving her grandmother's quiet house where rooms were full of things on mantelpieces and on tables—things not to be touched. Ironically, in this shady world of conjured recall, Veronica often talks about being touched: "I remember him [Charlie, Ada's husband] best with my skin. The creeping delight as he bent down to whisper; the bristle of his moustache and the grease of his tweed. He tickled you ... He used to sit me on his knee" (58–59), visceral reminisces that are not outright abusive, but could connote something more, particularly as Veronica puts them under a microscope to analyze their impact on her own and Liam's lives.

> **"In *The Gathering*, readers revisit the concept of family as a loving supportive unit."**

There are other ambiguous touches as well, as she recalls Ada's first lover and landlord, Nugent Lamb. These innuendos are not totally explored; rather they are impressionistic details that tally with Veronica's reminisces of Ada's half-dressed encounters and scuffles with Lamb—for unpaid rent, likely. As children, Veronica and Liam are shipped off to their grandmother's during a summer when their mother gave birth or was having a miscarriage. However, at one point, remembering herself as an eight year old, Veronica describes the "eye" of Nugent's "old penis" (221). If not true, how does a young girl recall such a vivid and specific detail?

It is at this time that Veronica imagines that she has located the transformative moment of Liam's downward plunge. She attempts to trace the roots of Liam's conflict to a memory, unsure if it is real or imagined. Searching for the origins of Liam's death, she explains, "The seeds of my brother's death were sown many years ago" (13). Reconstructing Liam through a variety of phrases and fleeting images and recitations, Veronica thinks of him as slightly fat, a beautiful adolescent, "frisky and lonely" (115), but she also observes that eventually alcohol wrecked him. A lad with a great sense of humor, never interested in material things, small and restless, annoying at times, a devoted caring uncle—Liam is fleshed out as Veronica wrestles with her feelings concerning his death.

The shift between times past and present, and the presence of an imagination that can transform a car seat into a slouched person, along with Veronica's own admittance, "I am not sure if it did really happen ... this thing may not have taken place ... I do not know the truth ... All I have are stories, night thoughts, the sudden convictions that uncertainty spawns" (2), casts doubt not on the credibility of the telling of her story, but on the exact faithfulness of the recall of events. She states,

> These are the things that I do, actually know.
>
> I know that my brother was sexually abused by Lambert Nugent. Or was probably sexually abused by Lambert Nugent. (224)

Veronica thinks she can remember strange and unsettling details of sexual advances, of the expression on Lamb's face, "the bridge of flesh between man and boy… Lamb's hands set square on either knee" (144). Deep in Veronica's thoughts and emotions, her stories provide an impression of events. The images are strong and defined; her memories feel circular as she attempts to piece together and understand how she has arrived at this moment in time. A metaphor for her desire to come full circle to the truth with cool understanding, she refers to the parking ramp, "[i]n the airport,[...] I drive round and round the carpark, floor after floor, until I am out under the evening sky" (28). Readers consider the credibility of Veronica's narration, so openly honest as to admit that she cannot know for sure the validity of her facts. Yet there are patterns of interactions, whether consummated or not, that substantiate troubling signposts, even if they exist only in a child's imagination and an adult's search to sift through her past.

> **"Readers consider the credibility of Veronica's narration, so openly honest as to admit that she cannot know for sure the validity of her facts."**

She focuses on diverse details from Liam's life, such as an illuminated arc of Liam's pee as she glimpses him through a window, and the non-colors of "oatmeal, cream, sandstone, slate," a kind of nervous liturgy, attempting to evoke a tapestry in which every color is in place and one clear picture can be discerned. Instead, readers locate the fleeting images of Veronica's troubled life as an assortment of soft and unfocused pictures, ghosts that confound and speak to Veronica in confusing, equivocating tones, enhancing her words to convey the pain of events she believes to have been transformative. Subtle connections recall this style of tossing, leaping, and sorting of memories as readers remember that Virginia Woolf, like Liam, weighted her pockets with stones and waded to her death in water. Further associations with Woolf and James Joyce's *The Dubliners'* use of the stream of consciousness writing underline Irish tales that may or may not be true. They provide broad strokes, generalizations that capture moments of intensity.

Veronica's searching for meaning with her parents does not offer insight. Their mother, Maureen, is useless in Veronica's reflection on her brother. A shell of a woman, she is worn out from birthing and losing so many children. Veronica's description of her mother as having a "flaccid absent-mindedness of the tongue

... her lips refuse to stay shut ... 'Gah, gah,' she says" (11) appears to be a lifelong indictment. Maureen is no help in retrieving the past. Rather, Veronica plays mother to her, attempting to shield Maureen from any troubling thoughts that her weak mother might have to face as a powerless parent in her children's lives.

"There are few new stories to be told today, although present day revelations to past myths can provide fresh insights."

There is no sentimentality in the gathering that occurs in Veronica's family's home as they lay Liam to rest. Midge, Mossie, Bea, Ernest, Stevie, Ita (Did she have a nose job in America?), Kitty, Alice, the twins Ivor and Jem all come together to acknowledge Liam's passing. They are a gaggle of siblings; all seem on tenterhooks, ready to escape, uncomfortable at being brought back together. Veronica is also bereft because her husband and siblings seem unable to share her despair. Here, with her brothers and sisters, she grapples with her own unrest, her unhappiness with her husband Tom, her guilt towards Liam, the fragments of memory as she tries to assemble some personal meaning. She dissects her family as a great cast of personalities, random individuals who happen to share the same genes, but who have been forever locked into roles assigned as children. Expected to care and care for one another, the relationships are predictable, particularly as their mother has been weak, formed by accident of birth, not by love. Indeed, they are strangers to one another, their lives facts of location and events, with few ties to meaningful links or coherence.

Remnants of their separate lives remain in the form of documents, "the most arbitrary kind, certificates of confirmation, Kitty's Irish Dancing; Ernest's Public Speaking … my degree" (214). In spite of the reason for gathering, there is little emotion or connection. Mossie and Ivor chat about his expensive jacket, finding little else to discuss. Veronica admits, "It's like Christmas in Hades. It is like we are all dead, and that's just fine" (209). Except for the spirit of Liam, Veronica is alone. Veronica's cognizance of Liam's abuse and the re-creation of a scene that she thinks she has witnessed with Lamb haunt her.

However, her realizations appear to be freeing, as the final chapter suggests she is at peace and can return to her comfortable life with Tom and the girls. Her difficult search has culminated in her acceptance of her family and of herself. Acknowledging all of the events that have brought her to this moment in time, Veronica says,

> But I do not want a different destiny from the one that has brought me here. I do not want another life. I just want to be able to live it, that's all ... I just want to be less afraid ... I have been falling for months. I have been falling into my own life, for months. And I am about to hit it now. (261)

Although it is unclear as to whether Veronica will have another child, we learn that Liam, in spite of his tumultuous life, has fathered a son, Rowan, a sign of hope and renewal, a second chance. A proper ending for a myth, a promise of a new beginning.

What does it all mean? Myth encourages interpretation, of seeing the individual in the universal

There are few new stories to be told today, although present day revelations to past myths can provide fresh insights. In a post post-modern era, more has been uncovered of the lives of victims and their tormentors, and sacrosanct institutions have been laid bare. The role of myth is one of interpretation, whether Jungian, Freudian, iconoclastic, psychoanalytical, or individual, for myths bring together the abstract generalizations and the individuals whose behavior can be deconstructed in the themes found in myths. The heavily laden stories of people set in times of change, or just in family groupings, encourage readers to look deeper while exploring further in order to better comprehend their worlds.

Orpheus Lost and *The Gathering* are two stories underpinned with archetypes of identity. Just as Turner Hospital and Enright's readers are aware of terrorist acts in contemporary society, some readers will also possess their own private stories of journeys, lost loves, perhaps abuse, or unconventional families—memories that have percolated up from the most respectable venues.

Each of us searches for that place called home where we can feel secure, loved, at peace. Or perhaps, as Pascal once suggested, it is the search and not the arrival that we long for; others would still disagree, preferring Robert Frost's contention that, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." But, as in unravelling myth, paradoxes, juxtapositions, and interpretations abound, as varied and diverse as the individuals who discuss and read them.

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