

Best Of 2011: The Children's Literature Network

BEST OF 2011: THE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE NETWORK

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Snipp, Snapp, Snute column

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The New Year is approaching and it's time to take stock. Here, from every corner of the world and in no particular order, are some of my favorite folktales published this year.

The Boy From the Dragon Palace by Margaret Read MacDonald is a funny Japanese tale that reminded me a little of The Fisherman's Wife. One day, a poor flower seller drops his leftover flowers into the sea as a gift for the Dragon King and in return he receives a snot-nosed boy-with the power to grant wishes! Of course the flower seller wishes for everything under the sun. He becomes rich but in the end, he forgets the meaning of "thank you," and loses everything. "You just can't help some humans," say the snot-nosed little boy and the Dragon King.

Another tale about a creature that just can't be satisfied is The Greedy Sparrow, an Armenian Tale by Lucine Kasbarian. It is a wonderful story about a cheeky sparrow that can turn every trade to his own advantage. Of course, he becomes so cocky that in the end, he (literally) falls from glory. Illustrator Zaikina's portrayals of both animal and human characters beautifully convey the tale's goofy fun.

The Sticky Doll Trap by Jessica Souhami is another traditional trickster tale, this one from West Africa. One by one, Hare tricks the other animals out of the water they have so carefully dug for.

Naturally, the animals decide to take revenge which succeeds, but only to a point. In the end Hare outwits them again. The stunning, brilliantly colored collage burst with fun and energy.

Monkey, A Trickster Tale from India by Gerald McDermott is a story I have loved telling for decades and I am happy to see this retelling.

For those who do not know the story it is about a monkey that is hungry for mangoes, which grow on an island in the river, but he can't swim! Crocodile offers to carry Monkey across the water on his back, but the trouble is, Crocodile is hungry, too-for Monkey! McDermott tells this classic tale with a sense of play that is a perfect match

for the vibrant illustrations.

I have loved the stories about Mulla Nasruddin, a legendary character whose misadventures are famous all across the Islamic world, so I was delighted to discover *The Wise Fool, Fables from the Islamic World* by Shahrukh Husain. It is a witty collection of stories about this eccentric and irreverent character, who you never quite know is wise or foolish. The stories always make you chuckle and think.

The Orphan: A Cinderella Story from Greece by Anthony Manna and Soula Mitakidou is a lovely version of the traditional tale. As in all the other Cinderella stories, there is a wicked stepmother and stepsisters, but this young girl receives gifts from nature: brilliance from the Sun, beauty from the Moon, gracefulness from the Dawn-and even a tiny pair of blue shoes from the Sea. It plays out much as the traditional tale but has enough unusual twists to hold the interest even of someone who has read scores of Cinderella stories.

How the Leopard Got His Claws is a fable by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe about the dangers of power taken by force. In the beginning, all the animals lived as friends with wise and gentle Leopard as their king. Only Dog rebels. He attacks Leopard and takes over as king. But when Leopard gets new claws (I won't give away the story here), he manages to regain his throne. Mary GrandPre's expressive and action-filled paintings really help bring this tale to life.

Never Forgotten by Patricia McKissack is a dark and quite difficult story about the pain of those that were left behind when the slave traders came. McKissack's emphasis on the storyteller's voice truly invites listeners to participate and engage and the amazing art by Leo and Diane Dillon is stunning. The content is difficult, but it is so engaging on every level that it leaves you thinking for days.

Big Turtle by David McLimans is one folktale I ended up buying. The story of how the earth was brought up on Turtle's back is not new, but McLimans' telling is so clear and fluid and his artwork so striking I felt like I understood the story in a new way.