The previous two essays emphasize that interpretations of a story are at best incomplete and raise the problem of whether writing can be informative without becoming authoritative. In this piece, Robin Barker demonstrates that interpretations, whether based on oral or written accounts, can simply be wrong. They can, however, be wrong in ways that tell us, if we listen to ourselves and each other carefully, something basic about the role of interpreters and the process of interpretation. “How Crane Got His Blue Eyes” is a Yup’ik tale that has been used for the classroom instruction and entertainment of Alaska Native and non-Native children for at least twenty-five years. Among such schoolchildren, in fact, it is perhaps the best-known of all Alaska Native tales. It is a moral tale, but how it is moral is open to... interpretation.

In attempting an interpretation, Barker comes face to face with her personal and cultural assumptions. Drawing on her understanding of teacher-student relationships, her personal experiences in the Yup’ik region, and her discussions with Alaska Native listeners and tellers, she traces her evolving comprehension of the crane story. She makes us listen repeatedly and carefully to different tellings and understandings. Each time she reaches a new provisional conclusion, we learn more about the ways that meaning is contingent and relational.

Increasingly, classrooms provide a primary context for adults to tell and children to listen to stories from a variety of cultures. Multicultural classrooms invite the use of materials that celebrate cultural diversity. Yet such materials tend to be adopted as if they automatically conveyed the essence of their sources. Teachers set out with specific objectives, intending children to receive certain messages from stories. These may or may not be messages which accurately reflect the cultural traditions in question; the teachers bring their own preconceived notions to this process, especially when they are representing unfamiliar cultures.
In either case, the children are generally treated as passive recipients of meaning: they either “get the point” or they do not. Teachers rarely see the children as active participants in the coconstruction of individualized and culturized meanings. Barker drives this point home with an anecdote illustrating that even when teachers are in fact telling stories from their own personal and cultural backgrounds, their listeners may come away with surprisingly varied messages. In the end, “How Crane Got His Blue Eyes” becomes a cautionary tale about the use of cautionary tales.

What follows is a description of the evolution in my own thinking about a Yup’ik tale known as “How Crane Got His Blue Eyes.” The tale is popularly used throughout Alaska in elementary classrooms; it is presented simply, without much thought about the complexities of investigating its meaning. As an educator who worked in the Yup’ik region for twelve years, I have come to recognize that folklore must be treated in ways that take these complexities into account. Overcoming linguistic and cultural bias is not easy, however. For example, my own first interpretations of the story were strongly influenced by European oral and literary conventions. As I thought about the story, examined alternate texts, and talked with Yup’ik friends, however, I became increasingly aware of the ways that meaning is coconstructed in general, and particularly in cross-cultural interaction. Using myself as a foil, then, I will juxtapose differing interpretations of this story to offer glimpses of the ways meaning is negotiated between speaker and audience.

The discussion does not lead ultimately to an internally coherent interpretation of the tale; rather it is meant to show, through one example, how complex the use of folklore is. Clearly, the way in which Euro-American, Yup’ik, or other audiences of schoolchildren negotiate the meaning of stories with the teachers they encounter is an important matter.

The Teller and the Tale

Maggie Lind of Bethel was the most well-known, popular storyteller in the Kuskokwim region. Her tellings of “How Crane Got His Blue Eyes” have appeared in a variety of forms, oral and written, Yup’ik and English. Published and audiotaped versions may be
found in classrooms throughout the state and are widely known to the Alaska public through radio broadcasts.

I have included two versions of the story here. The first I transcribed from a record made by ethnomusicologist Lorraine Koranda in 1966.

"How the Crane Got Blue Eyes"

One time the crane was walking along. He was going to eat some berries, so he took his eyes off and put them on a stump. And he said, "If someone comes along, you must holler to me and tell me that somebody's coming."

So he went out and started eating berries, and after a while, while he was eating berries, the eyes said, "Master, somebody's coming, and they are going to take us away!"

So the crane quickly ran down to the river and put on his eyes and looked; and it was only a piece of wood drifting along. So he put them back on the stump again and said, "Don't you tell me any more stories after this."

So the crane went back and ate some more berries, but after a while the eyes called again, "Master, somebody's going to take us away." And they got farther and farther away. So after a while he went down and looked for his eyes, and somebody had taken them away.

The crane went back into the tundra and he found cranberries and put them in for his eyes. But everything was too red.

And he took blackberries and put them for his eyes. And everything was too dark.

So he found blueberries, and he put them on. And everything was just nice.

And ever since, the crane has blue eyes. (Koranda 1966)

Maggie Lind told the second version to Gladys Fancher for publication in a volume of stories from all over Alaska "primarily for use in schools and in homes of schoolchildren" (Frost 1971: dust jacket notes).

"How Crane Got His Blue Eyes"

A long time ago Crane lived by himself on the tundra near Bethel, on the Kuskokwim River.
Crane knew where some good, juicy berries grew.
One morning he awoke very hungry for some berries.
He arose, stretched his long legs, and flapped his big wings. 
Up, up, up he flew, on his way to the berries. 
Soon Crane found the berries. 
He flew down to the ground. 
Then he took out his eyes, and put them on a stump. 
Crane: "Eyes, you watch for me. If you see anything coming, call me. I will not go far away."
Eyes: "Yes, Master, I will watch for you."
Crane went fast to get to the berries. 
He ate some of the sweet, juicy berries. 
Then Crane’s eyes began calling him. 
Eyes: "Master, Master, I see something coming this way. Please hurry, Master, before it gets me."
Crane tried to run fast to his eyes. 
He put them on and looked all around. 
All he saw were some willows. 
He took out his eyes again and put them on a stump. 
Crane: "Don’t fool me again. Just call me when you really see something coming."
Crane went back to eat more berries. 
My, they tasted so good. 
They tasted so very, very good. 
Again his eyes called him. 
Eyes: "Master, Master, hurry, hurry! I see something coming."
Again Crane tried to run fast to his eyes. 
He put them on to see what his eyes had seen. 
All he saw was a log floating down the river. 
Crane: "Eyes, you fooled me again! Be more careful before you call me."
Crane took out his eyes again and put them on the stump. 
He went back to eat more berries. 
My, how sweet they tasted! 
Again his eyes called him. 
Eyes: "Master, Master, come! Someone is taking me away. Hurry! Come and get me!"
Crane tried again to get to his eyes. 
When he got back to the stump, he could not find them. 
His eyes were gone! 
Crane: "Oh, my! How will I see now? My eyes are gone. I must find new eyes!"
Crane picked up two blackberries to use for his eyes.
Everything looked black.
Crane: "Oh, my! I can’t see at all."
Crane took out the blackberries.
Then he picked up two cranberries to use for his eyes.
Crane: "Oh, my! Everything looks red."
Crane didn’t like that at all.
He took out the two cranberries.
Crane then found two blueberries to use for his eyes.
He liked them.
Everything was so very pretty.
He saw blue sky and blue water.
Crane: "I’ll use these blueberries for my eyes. I like them!"
That is how Crane got his blue eyes. (Frost 1971: 23–26)

The differences between these two popular versions are immediately noticeable and invite comment. The playscript format of the Fancher text is obviously not characteristic of spoken narrative. As a schoolteacher, Fancher very likely decided that the importance of using “culturally relevant” material in classrooms justified considerable revision in the interest of making the story more understandable and fun. In her author’s notes, she says that the stories are meant to be used in classrooms, possibly in dramatic presentations. She may have anticipated the creation of costumes and scenery and imagined hearing the tale in children’s voices. In this case, what is altered along with the text is the adult/child relationship of teller and listener. In the playscript, the children are cast as the speakers, while normally the tale would be told by an adult to children. Generally, unlike in Western schools, Yup’ik children are not expected to “perform” for adults but to listen to them respectfully.

Although these changes most likely were made by Fancher, Lind probably adjusted her telling specifically for schoolchildren as well. There are two reasons for thinking this. One has to do with Lind’s history, and the other with what we know about the way she framed her stories for general audiences of children.

Maggie Lind was raised at the Moravian children’s home in Bethel, but she told me that she spent considerable time with her grandmother, who told her many stories. Lind was bilingual in Yup’ik and English. A picture of her at the children’s home at about ten years of age places her birth close to 1905 (Lenz and Barker 1985: 41). She must have been approaching seventy when these stories were collected; she died in 1976. Fancher was a non-Native teacher who lived in Bethel
for over a decade in the 1950s and 1960s. Although the book does not specify, it is likely that Lind told this story to Fancher in English as she often did when addressing a wide public, for example on the radio.

Maggie Lind was known for her particular interest in storytelling, the preservation of tradition, and the education of children. Lind was vocal in her defense of traditional lands and ways (Barker 1975: 10). Another photograph in the Bethel history (Lenz and Barker 1985: 114) shows her telling and illustrating traditional girls' storyknife tales in 1936 (see Ager 1971; Oswalt 1964). Her grandson, John Active, characterized her as a woman with a driving commitment to teaching young people and passing Yup’ik culture to coming generations. She often voiced the need for young people not to forget (Active 1992).

Raised by white missionaries and married to a man whose mother was Yup’ik and whose father was a white trader, she grew up in the midst of Bethel’s mixed Euro-American and Yup’ik cultures. One might speculate that although Lind was always very upbeat about her life with the Moravians, her preservation activities were important to her as a way of recapturing experiences lost by her upbringing as well as a marker of ethnicity (for a discussion of outmarriage and ethnic markers, see Hensel 1992).

At any rate, Lind consciously (and probably unconsciously as well) worked to bridge the cultural gap in her tellings of Yup’ik tales, sporadically incorporating certain European elements. For example, in another story she told, the stock character of the unmarried Yup’ik girl becomes, in her translation, a princess, and the married couple lives “happily ever after” (Lind 1972).

She also made changes to the crane tale. Many traditional Yup’ik stories begin with a statement placing them in an unspecified, distant past—“a long time ago”—but in a specific place (for examples, see Nelson 1899: 457–99). Lind follows this formula in the Fancher version. However, the summary sentence at the end—“That is how Crane got his blue eyes”—is less characteristic and may derive from European patterns. (Alternatively, it may be another adaptation by Fancher, since the Koranda recording ends, “And ever since, the crane has blue eyes.”) Yup’ik legends that explain natural phenomena usually finish with a statement about the way things are today without making cause and effect explicit (again, see Nelson 1899: 457–99). This shifts the stance of storyteller from expert to observer and models for the young listener a socially appropriate narrative style. The Fancher version ends with a clear pronunciation about a fact, very uncharacteristic in Yup’ik narrative.
I also find it interesting that, for the musicologist, the eyes cry for help twice, but for the schoolteacher, they cry out three times, the magical number in European folktales. Is this an accommodation on Lind's part? Perhaps because she knew that the story was to be used in school, she unconsciously adjusted the form to sound like the "school stories" that she had heard at the Moravian orphanage. After all, the colloquial "holler" in the Koranda recording is transformed to a more formal "call me" in the school version. In general, the language of the Fancher version has the feel of the basal schoolbooks of the time. Phrases like, "up, up, up he flew," could have been lifted straight out of *Dick and Jane*. Is this Lind or Fancher? The use of the designation "Master" for Crane in both versions draws from the language of fairy tales and shows Lind's ability to connect Yup'ik stories with European literary convention. Some of these modifications may be Fancher's, but this version of the story has clearly been adjusted to fit in to school.

A First Interpretation

The first time I heard this story, my interpretation was almost completely determined by European associations. The degree to which such cultural assumptions can distort interpretation is delightfully illustrated in Laura Bohannan's classic essay, "Shakespeare in the Bush" (1966). As a diversion from her fieldwork, Bohannan tried and failed to prove the universality of *Hamlet* in a lively and confusing discussion with a group of Tiv tribesmen in West Africa. Just as the Tiv were able to construct a coherent, if incorrect, interpretation of *Hamlet* based on African witchcraft, so I constructed an interpretation of "How Crane Got His Blue Eyes" in terms of cautionary tales familiar to me.

To begin with, I envisioned the mysterious something that stole the eyes to be a wolf. For Euro-Americans like myself, the wolf is the prototypical threat that lurks just outside of civilization, ready to destroy the unwary. This image anticipated my later association of the story with the European tale, "The Boy Who Cried Wolf," an Aesop's fable as ubiquitous in Euro-American elementary classrooms as the crane story is in Alaskan ones (Reeves 1962: 59). In my experience of the story, the two tales paralleled one another; the fable cast a shadow on the Alaskan tale and outlined its meaning in my unconscious.
In the European story, a boy is assigned to watch a flock of sheep for the village. Bored, he pretends a wolf is approaching and calls for help. This is repeated once or twice, and the villagers, disgusted with his foolery, refuse to come on the final summons. This time the wolf really has appeared, and, depending on the version, either the boy or the sheep are killed.

In my mind, both stories were obviously meant to teach children that it pays to do what your superiors tell you, thereby reinforcing the social hierarchy. I suspect that other white schoolteachers would be likely, as I was at first, to understand Lind’s message to be that “lying does not pay.”

I started by unconsciously visualizing a lurking threat (a wolf, which could be a threat to children and the social order) which greatly affected my understanding of possible themes. I drew on literary convention to do this (Aesop and the wolf genre of fairy tale), and then I tried to adjust my interpretation according to my perception of Lind’s intentions. Given her background, the message that lying does not pay seemed plausible. However, an attempt to relate the story to Yup’ik culture was to lead me to quite a different conclusion.

A Second Reading: Attempting a Yup’ik Interpretation

Any attempt at a Yup’ik reading of the story, one that takes Yup’ik cultural themes and beliefs into account, will of course still be limited by my outsider’s perspective. In fact, I realize that even if I were Yup’ik, my understanding of the story would still be relative to my individual experience. However, as I tried to extend my thinking to account for a Yup’ik cultural perspective, themes that emerged included the importance of vision, reciprocal relationships in the natural world, characterization of ideal hierarchical relationships, and finally, some concrete details about the natural world.

Although I tried my best to “see” as Yupiit might, drawing on my own experiences with them, Aesop continued to foil my speculation. I could shift my thinking about the story content, but the influence of my culture on the process of analysis remained. Rather than edit these “failures” out of subsequent drafts, I have left them in to support my argument that cultural context is everything when it comes to listening.

In retrospect, the process would have pleased the forgotten elementary teacher who taught me about fables. In most fables, I
reasoned, the animals represent prototypical humans. Here's somebody out berry picking (must be a female since berry picking is mostly a female endeavor). There is also a subordinate character, the eyes, ordered to stay put. This must be a child. Any Bethel child could immediately identify with the familiar experience of being taken out on the tundra during berry-picking season. Furthermore, the eyes, like a child, come from the body of the crane.

For very small children, berry picking is not always a wonderful experience. The spongy tundra is very difficult to move around on and does not offer much entertainment. In addition, mothers are unenthusiastic about children eating a lot of berries. In short, berry picking is potentially boring, and the adults are too busy and having too much fun to want to be disturbed. In the story, Lind makes it lip-smackingly obvious that the crane is having all the fun.

Crane's solution to this problem is characteristic of Yup'ik parents. He gives the eyes (child) a job, in this case the responsibility to look for danger. It should be noted here that by Yup'ik standards, it is a compliment and a privilege for a younger person to do something for an elder. As in "The Boy Who Cried Wolf," perhaps we are being told that the child's responsibility is critical for the group as a whole. However, the eyes then fail in this assignment.

The interpretations of the two stories, though parallel up to this point, diverged radically with the meaning of the failure. The European boy fails because he is dishonest and unmindful of the time and energy he is demanding of adults. Importantly, he also fails to anticipate the reactions of the adults. The nature of the failure of the Yup'ik "child" is less explicit. Crane does accuse his eyes of "fooling" him, but he does not refuse to come at the third call. This immediately eliminates the conclusion that adults will mistrust unreliable reports.

In addition, the word fooling may carry a moral impact for Euro-Americans that did not exist for Lind. In Yup'ik, there is only one verb, ialu-, which can mean either lying or joking. Given the lighthearted, trickster quality of the story, the fact that the crane consistently heeds the eyes' calls, and the focus of the ending on the satisfaction of the crane, I could only conclude that this tale is not about the dangers of lying.

"Then what is it about?" I asked myself, as I wondered at how easily I had associated the story with the Aesop fable. I thought of myself on the tundra or looking out across a huge expanse of the frozen Kuskokwim River, puzzling over some mysterious and ambiguously distant object. I remembered how hard it is to be sure about
what one sees. Perhaps the story recognizes that one's own eyes are very quickly fooled on the tundra, that learning to see accurately is not easy. I wondered whether the eyes had actually been seeing something all along. The storyteller leaves this question unanswered, another clue that weakens the idea that lying is a central theme. In any case, unlike the adults in Aesop's fable, Crane is not willing to take the risk of ignoring the warning. For a Yup'ik audience, I concluded, the interpersonal dimension of lying must be incidental.

What I then decided is that the story is not about lying, about the importance of using words wisely. Instead, it is about vision and the importance of using one's senses wisely. The fact that the eyes can be understood either as a separate character from the crane or as part of a single creature allows the story to be heard on two levels. If the story is understood in the first sense, as a drama between parent and child, then the child suffers a terrible fate for lack of acuity; he or she disappears and is replaced by another child. The importance of learning to use one's eyes wisely in order to keep (or take) one's place in the social sphere is amply demonstrated. The theme of obedience to one's superiors is still a central value, but it revolves not around honesty but around paying visual attention.

In the other sense—with Crane and his eyes as a single character whose acuity fails—the story shows simply that vision is essential for personal survival. The crane's panic at the loss of his vision and his care in replacing his old eyes with better ones reveal how important this is.

These themes of the importance of vision and learning to use one's vision well are ubiquitous in Yup'ik culture. Fienup-Riordan's essay, "The Mask: The Eye of the Dance," details many ways in which sight is socially restricted or put to beneficial use because of its power (1990: 49–67). Another legend collected by Fienup-Riordan, "The Boy Who Went to Live with the Seals," outlines a young hunter's education. As part of his training, he is admonished many times not to fall asleep, which is, of course, to keep one's eyes open (1983: 177). This same admonition is repeatedly echoed in Lantis's collection of descriptions by older men of their traditional education (1960). That Yup'ik children should hear cautionary tales about vision makes sense. Within Eskimo social hierarchies, vision is to be used in circumscribed ways for the protection and benefit of all (Burch 1975). Conventions of gaze and eye contact are related both to maintaining the social hierarchy and ensuring hunting success.

Stories featuring removable eyes that explore themes of vision,
blindness, and power are not uncommon in other Native American folklore. Many of them, notably the coyote stories, contain elements of trickery as well. Examples can be found in Rothenberg’s Nez Perce coyote tale (1972: 102) or the Winnebago hare cycle collected by Radin (1956: 79–80). Morrow’s essay, “The Loon with the Ivory Eyes,” cites variants from several Eskimo groups of a story in which a loon gives sight to a blind boy (1975: 146–47). Interestingly, Morrow associates these stories with artifacts and ritual practices that draw connections between birds (loons in particular), powerful vision, clairvoyance, shamanistic powers, and removable eyes.

These ethnographic readings gave me an expanded literary context for the crane story which, coupled with my long experience with Yup’ik parents and children, prompted revised interpretations. I know what it is like to see and move about on the tundra. I know what berry picking is like for adults and children, men and women. These experiences contributed greatly to my growing understanding of the story.

Even so, I was drawing on an interpretive convention from European fable (animal symbolizes human) to create a picture of mother and child on the tundra. I had also glossed the gender of the crane, substituting female for male following European symbolic conventions. Would this be possible, or even relevant, for Yup’ik listeners? Lind consistently refers to Crane as “he,” but I was able to overlook this, knowing that Yup’ik pronouns do not specify gender and bilingual speakers often substitute “he” for “she.” Translation forced Lind to make a gender choice that put my interpretation in question.

Although I felt a little closer, I still did not think that I had been able to understand the story as a Yup’ik might. In spite of my exposure to Yup’ik folklore and my experience in the Kuskokwim area, the effects of my schooling in European literature were hard to shake. Given the mix, it is difficult to say that I had done any more than make the story mine. At this point, cumulatively, I thought the story was about both honesty in adult-child relations and the importance of using vision wisely.

It is very possible, given her mixed history, that the story carried both messages for Lind, one about honesty and obedience and another about vision, just as it did for me at this point. In any case, as an instructional tale for the mixed community of children in Bethel, the message is likely to be quite dependent on the listener.

Up to this point, the thrust of this process of interpretation has been to decide what the story was “about.” This search for the message
in a tale is a part of listening that has been reflexive for me since elementary school. I have been taught to figure out what "the point" is, particularly in the case of fables, which are so clearly constructed around a moral lesson. The explicitly stated moral of the Aesop story is "liars are not believed even when they tell the truth" (Reeves 1962: 60). Morrow’s article in this book suggests that morals should be left open to individual interpretation. Thus, there are no stated morals in Yup’ik stories, a fact that continues to frustrate non-Native students as they read folklore. Whatever messages may be embedded in the crane story, it is characteristic that they are implied. Implicitness is highly valued in Yup’ik culture (Morrow 1990), so it is not surprising that one needs to look to the context to understand the intentions of the speaker.

Conversations: Yup’ik Readings

Having carried my interpretation as far as reading and personal experience would take me, I finally shared my ideas with two Yup’ik women who were interested in the progress of my essay. Nastasia (Cugun) Wahlberg of Bethel, a literature student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, had heard the story from her mother as a child and now tells it to her young daughters. Rhona Nanalook, a young teacher from Manokotak, had heard the story in primary school (probably the Fancher version).

Some important differences in interpretation existed between us. The parent-child symbolism had never occurred to either woman. After some conversation, we decided that this stemmed from my having related the crane’s behavior to berry picking. Wahlberg pointed out that the crane had simply gone out on the tundra to eat, something just as likely to be done by either a man or a woman. Both women saw the character as somewhat foolish, not at all parental. Nanalook felt that Crane was careless in his “gluttony.” Wahlberg added that the story ends too positively to carry a heavy moral message.

Both agreed, however, that vision is a central theme in the story. Nanalook’s reading was that Crane did not look carefully enough (perhaps because he was foolish in removing his eyes). Wahlberg felt that Crane was resting his eyes and that they were too “flighty” and “fearful” to make wise judgments about “what is truly dangerous.” Interestingly, their interpretations differed as to who errs and whether the eyes and Crane are seen as one or separate characters.
However, both women strongly supported the idea that the story communicates the social importance of using one’s eyes correctly and that circumscribed use of vision has moral overtones.

Wahlberg and Nanalook both made reference to another broad theme of Yup’ik culture, the reciprocity of plants, animals, and humans as equal elements in the natural world. Many Yup’ik myths describe actual transformations, and most teach the importance of proper interspecies treatment for mutual survival. The representation of humanlike animals very simply reinforces the close relationship between animals and humans. In addition, Wahlberg pointed out that “nature [berries] and animal spirits are one” in this story, and the use of berries for eyes reinforces the idea in a very literal way. She also observed that by “manipulating nature,” trying out different berries to use as eyes, Crane may not have demonstrated a completely correct stance toward the natural world. She suggested that this lapse adds to the comic quality of the story.

Both Wahlberg and Nanalook stressed the entertainment value of the story, and I was reminded of the first time I had heard it on the Bethel radio, a very funny rendition by Lind. Wahlberg mentioned that her mother’s version was hilarious, that her description of the crane eating berries, losing his eyes, and especially trying out new ones was great cause for laughter. Wahlberg said that she tries to recapture that spirit when she tells the story to her young daughters.

Interestingly, she mentioned that she has introduced a change in these tellings. Although she likes delighting the children with the comedy, she also uses the story to teach the colors of the various berries, important details in the natural world. To do this, she has added salmonberries. This alteration demonstrates flexible use, and by implication, Wahlberg’s understanding that stories can vary in purpose. That a story is changed in its rendition hints at an underlying belief that meaning lies as much with each successive listener as with the “original” storyteller. This idea contrasts with the general Euro-American view, which tends to see literature as more static in rendition and purpose.

For each speaker and listener in this sequence—Lind, Fancher, Koranda, myself, Nanalook, Wahlberg, and her daughters—ideas about the purposes of storytelling are determined by culture, context, and personal experience, and for all of us, purpose certainly affects meaning. Among many possibilities, Fancher’s purposes might have been literacy development and cultural awareness. Lind’s could have been teaching values, developing cultural pride, and entertaining. With
her children, Wahlberg uses the story for didactic and entertainment purposes. For Nanalook, Wahlberg, and myself, the story became a departure point for a series of conversations about values, literacy convention, child rearing, and pedagogy in both Yup'ik and Euro-American cultures.

As a result of these conversations, I identified main themes that seemed essentially Yup'ik: the importance of right behavior (if not obedience), the role of vision in the social sphere, and the essential importance of clear sight for personal survival. Ultimately, the message that seemed clearest to me after our conversation was that reciprocity in the natural world must be practiced by both parties with the utmost care, or disaster will result.

A Classroom Event

Now that I have reached this point in my evolving interpretation of the crane story, it should be increasingly clear that the ways in which an individual speaker and listener construct meaning are exponentially variable as the story interacts with cultural context, narrative conventions, and perceived storytelling purposes. The two crane stories are examples of a tale collected in interviews. How would Maggie Lind have told it to second graders in Bethel, or how does Rhona Nanalook tell it to her Athabaskan preschool children in Fairbanks? For that matter, how would I tell it?

In my current work instructing beginning teachers, I often have the opportunity to see how they use folklore in school. A storytelling event that I observed in a classroom not long ago illustrates how difficult it can be for teachers and schoolchildren, speakers and audiences, not to mention education instructors, to mutually negotiate meaning. What is particularly wonderful about the case in question is that it involved an Alaska Native teacher telling a story of her own to non-Native children. As her white supervisor, I found that I was in a position to understand the response of her students and explore with her how it differed from the meanings she thought were being communicated. In this situation, I benefited in turn from the lessons I had learned from Maggie Lind’s crane story.

The teacher was Linda Evans, an Athabaskan woman in her thirties, and the schoolchildren were students from white and African-American military families. In the middle of a lesson on Athabaskan
subsistence living, Mrs. Evans decided to tell a story from her experience as a child. She set the stage, telling the children that she and her parents and grandmother used to set snares for rabbits. The snares needed to be checked each day, and sometimes she was assigned to the chore. The children listened with rapt attention as Mrs. Evans described the beauty of the trail and snowy trees, the way the snare worked, that the rabbits were dead and frozen when they were collected, and how they lay stiffly in the sack as she carried it along the trail. These last details prompted looks of discomfort.

Then Mrs. Evans described coming around a bend to find a live rabbit in one of the snares. Aloud, she remembered looking at the creature, knowing that she was supposed to kill it and bring it home. She told how she had searched for exactly the right stick to club the animal, how she had raised the stick and then hesitated. The expressions on the children’s faces showed intense interest at this point. An audible exclamation of relief and appreciation went up as the teacher reported that she had lowered the stick and released the rabbit. They smiled as she described its bounding escape through the snow.

From this point in the story on, Mrs. Evans’s delivery intensified, but the children’s interest appeared to wane. The teacher described walking back home with dread and her relief at not being asked too many questions about her expedition. She then related that her mother had checked the snares the following day and returned to confront her about the missing rabbit. Both her mother and grandmother had been angry with her, and she described the scolding she had received.

During these last details, Mrs. Evans looked expectantly at the students as if she was reaching the climax of the story. What she saw were fidgety children, some with hands raised. Clearly they felt the story was over and it was their turn to talk. She lamely added that she had been disobedient and had not been able to escape the consequences.

When the teacher then called on the students for their comments and questions, they generally expressed their admiration for her good deed in saving the rabbit’s life. They objected to the scolding and sympathized with her. No one asked how Mrs. Evans’s mother had found out about the rabbit. No one commented on her misconduct. The more the students talked, and the more Mrs. Evans reiterated the position that she had done wrong, the more a feeling of impasse set in. Both the students and teacher began to falter in their assertions and look frustrated and confused.
Later, when I asked Mrs. Evans how she felt about telling the story, she expressed frustration that the children had not “got the point.” After deeper probing, it became clear that she felt that the mystery and interest in the story lay not in the events surrounding the escape of the rabbit but in her mother’s detection of what had happened in the footprints that revealed the child’s search for the stick and the animal’s escape. Although this part of the story was not told, Mrs. Evans thought that this point should have been self-evident. Additionally, she was frustrated that the moral of the story had been missed. The children had actually acclaimed what she felt was a breach of proper behavior. For Athabaskans (and for Yupiit), game which offers itself must be taken, or the species will be seriously offended. Worse yet, her respected mother and grandmother had ended up the villains of the tale.

This incident perfectly exemplifies the way that speaker and audience, each bringing to a story a set of values, conventions, and purposes, can fail to negotiate meaning. In this case, everyone involved seemed aware that a discrepancy of interpretation had taken place. In other instances, teacher and students might have adjusted and agreed on a negotiated meaning without knowing they had done so. Or they might have decided on quite different interpretations without becoming aware of the discrepancy. My sense is that the incident in Mrs. Evans’s classroom was the exception in that an obvious impasse was reached.

More often, I believe that speakers and audiences (teachers and students especially) are inclined to think that communication has taken place when discourse flows smoothly according to the conventions of the setting. Since these conventions are ritualized and explicitly practiced at school, special dangers exist when materials (like folklore) that allow highly variable interpretation and yet are supposed to definitively represent cultures are used.

Conclusion

The varied interpretations of Maggie Lind’s story that I have presented here should complicate the picture enough to give teachers a healthy appreciation for the process of telling and listening in a cross-cultural context. On the levels of concrete content, structure, genre, symbolic convention, purpose, and analytic convention, to name only a few, the mutually constructed meanings of a story remain subject
to cultural context. Meaning seems about as substantial as a wolf's shadow when it falls across the unconscious assumptions that dwell within the safe fold of cultural conventions.

In raising these questions, I do not intend to discourage adults from using folklore in classrooms. Instead, I urge caution about easy, one-sided interpretation. I also suggest that teachers consider audiences of children; they need to pay close attention to the variability of meaning that can lie between speaker and audience. The idea of telling the story to children and predicting the way my telling and their hearing would emerge is daunting, given the difficulty I encountered sorting out my own understanding of the tale and deriving a Yup'ik interpretation. Crane's message—that reciprocity must be conducted with care—seems relevant. I encourage adults to open the doors of complexity to children. A group of students working together to construct alternate meanings gains a valuable appreciation for the variability of interpretation.

Sometimes, in spite of all these points of difference, a bit of common ground can be found as well. If pressed, I would have to say that the story teaches all of us about observation. Even for non-Yupiit, this message seems to come across. As a preschooler, my own son heard the story on the radio and was fascinated by one tiny detail: the eye color of the crane. Was it true? Only looking carefully will tell.

Notes

This paper benefited greatly from conversations with Phyllis Morrow, Nastasia Wahlberg, and Rhona Nanalook.

1. Maggie Lind’s stories in this volume are not credited to her. Her grandson, John Active, confirmed that she told them to Fancher for the Frost collection.

References


Yup’ik translator Vernon Chimegalrea records place names with Tululksak elders Edward Wise, Peter Waskie, and Peter Napoka, July 1988. Photo by Robert Drozda.