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A Conversation with Barbara Duncan

Editor of *The Origin of the Milky Way and Other Living Stories of the Cherokee*

Illustrated by Shan Goshorn

Published November 1, 2008 by the University of North Carolina Press

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Q: In 1998, UNC Press published *Living Stories of the Cherokee*—a volume that you collected and edited. How does *The Origin of the Milky Way and Other Living Stories of the Cherokee* differ from this earlier work?

A: *The Origin of the Milky Way* is made for children, about ten years old and up, with illustrations. The stories are grouped by their themes—living with people, living with animals, with plants, spirits, monsters, language, and the past and future. Teachers will find this easy to use in their classrooms with any curriculum. The stories in *Origin* are selected from *Living Stories*.

Q: What is a “living story”?

A: This means that the story was learned from a living person, not a book. And the stories are told by Cherokee people living today. Folklorists call this “oral tradition.” To me, it also means that the Cherokee culture is still alive, and part of it lives in these stories.

Q: What makes Cherokee stories unique?

A: Stories around the world have some common elements—a hero, a search, a battle, a lesson. But stories around the world also differ from one culture to the next. These differences tell us what’s important to that particular group of people.

One thing that makes Cherokee stories unique is that they are full of the animals, plants, and places of the southern Appalachians. Cherokees say they have lived in this rugged, beautiful, diverse place “forever.”

The other thing that makes Cherokee stories unique is how they express the traditional values of the culture. For example, in European folk tales, a happy ending means that Jack gets a pot of gold and marries a princess. There are NO Cherokee stories that end like that. In Cherokee stories, a happy ending means that something happens for the good of the people—a monster is destroyed, or a lesson is learned—someone who brags learns to be modest, or a man and wife stop fighting. This tells us what’s important in Cherokee culture.

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Q: Can you explain the unusual format of the stories?

A: When I started to transcribe the stories that I had recorded from various sessions with the storytellers—interviews, performances, school programs—I realized that they were speaking with a subtle rhythm, more like poetry than prose. When they switched from just talking to telling stories, the rhythm of their spoken language changed.

I wanted readers to be able to hear how the stories were actually told, so I used a form like free verse. Every time the storyteller paused, I made a new line. So if you read it with a brief pause at the end of the line, you can hear how they spoke when they told the story. This also meant I could use their exact words—the pauses help you understand the meaning— so I didn't have to add words of my own.

This is a form of transcribing American Indian storytelling called ethnopoetics that some anthropologists and poets began using in the 1970s. Dennis Tedlock, Jerome Rothenberg, and Dell Hymes have all used this method to write down native oral traditions. They wanted to show how poetic these traditions are—a lot like the original *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as told by Homer in the ancient Greek oral tradition.

Q: Are you a Cherokee? If not, what is your relation to Eastern Band Cherokee culture?

A: I am not Cherokee, I am white. I moved to the mountains more than twenty-five years ago to visit some Cherokee people I met, and have been friends with and worked with Cherokee people ever since.

I have tried to help Cherokee people preserve their culture, keep traditions alive, and bring back some of the old knowledge that's been lost. At the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, where I work, our mission is to “preserve and perpetuate” the history and culture. So we have worked in partnership with Cherokee potters to bring back the old stamped pottery style that is more than 3,000 years old in the southern Appalachians, but almost disappeared during the twentieth century. We sponsor the Warriors of AniKituhwa dance group, that recreates Cherokee dances by using their traditional knowledge along with songs from wax cylinder recordings and descriptions from more than 250 years ago.

Q: Six storytellers are included in *The Origin of the Milky Way*. Tell us about your collaboration.

A: I try to listen to what Cherokee people think is important and to collaborate with them as a colleague. In the early 1990s, I helped create a speakers' bureau through Qualla Arts and Crafts and the North Carolina Arts Council, at the request of the Cherokee community. I realized that there were half a dozen or more really great storytellers who wanted to take Cherokee stories to a wider audience. So the original *Living Stories*, and now *Origin*, are both part of my efforts to help them get their voices heard by people around the country.

Q: What can you tell us about illustrator Shan Goshorn?

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A: Shan Goshorn is a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. She is a very talented artist and an activist for American Indian people who lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Shan takes photographs of Cherokee people and then hand colors them, and adds other graphic designs to make her art, as you can see on the cover of *Origin*.

One of the reasons she likes to use photographs is to show that native people are still here—still part of our contemporary world of technology. This is her first illustrated book, and I love her drawings.

Shan and I have taught workshops together, training Cherokee students to document their culture through interviews and photography. These students realized that their grandparents actually knew a lot! Their work became part of the Archives of the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, and we put together traveling shows of their photographs. I have tremendous respect for Shan and all her work.

Q: You advised bestselling novelist Charles Frazier on Cherokee culture when he was writing his second book, *Thirteen Moons*. What was it like to work on that project with him?

A: Charles Frazier was wonderful to work with. In addition to being a brilliant writer, he is a genuinely sincere and generous man. He was concerned about how Cherokee people would react to the book, and how he could give something back to them. As a result, I worked with him and a Cherokee woman, Myrtle Driver Johnson, to create a Cherokee language translation of a section of *Thirteen Moons*. Proceeds from its publication go to create additional translations of literature as part of the efforts to help preserve and revitalize the Cherokee language.

Q: What purpose does storytelling play in Cherokee life and culture?

A: Storytelling teaches children and reminds adults how a Cherokee person is supposed to live. It teaches lessons about life and how to get along. It passes on information. It makes people laugh, which is important in life! Storytelling also teaches children to pay attention to the world around them by making them aware of the characteristics of animals: the meadowlark's big feet, the pileated woodpecker's red head and black and white body—like an old woman's dress and kerchief. Storytelling also connects people to their past—through their grandparents and other storytellers in the community.

Q: What traditions are you preserving in *The Origin of the Milky Way*?

A: This book preserves twenty-six stories, but it doesn't preserve the Cherokee storytelling tradition. The only way that tradition survives is when a Cherokee person decides to tell these stories to his or her children. Because when someone hears these stories from a living storyteller, they hear the words, but they hear so much more: the rhythm, the humor, the tone of voice, the reason for the story, the right time to tell it, the body language that goes with it. All of this is so much more than you can capture on the page of a book. And it is so important because that's

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what really conveys the culture. Every tradition is just one generation away from disappearing forever.

Q: How are these stories presented in public?

A: These stories are presented in public as part of school programs in the Cherokee Central Schools, during festivals like the Cherokee Voices Festival every June at the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, and for visiting groups that request a storyteller. Cherokee storytellers have performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesboro, Tennessee, and around the country.

Q: Has the art of storytelling changed over the years in Cherokee culture?

A: Storytelling has changed from being mostly in the Cherokee language to being mostly in English. People say that some of the humor and some of the detailed descriptions get lost along the way.

Storytelling used to be something that people did at home in the evenings—sitting around the fire or sitting out on the front porch with their families and with visitors. Now, in the evenings, people are going to their kids' ball games, or watching television. Storytelling now happens at festivals or in public much more than it used to.

Q: How do you hope this book will be used?

A: I hope this book will be enjoyed by all kinds of readers—children and adults alike. I hope that teachers will use this book to teach about Cherokee culture and other American Indian cultures, to let students know that the Cherokee people are still here today, still passing on their living traditions through stories that are scary, funny, sad, and wise.

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: A conversation with Barbara Duncan, editor of **THE ORIGIN OF THE MILKY WAY AND OTHER LIVING STORIES OF THE CHEROKEE** (University of North Carolina Press, Fall 2008). The text of this interview is available at: <http://www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/duncan/>

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