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A Conversation with Anne Shelby

Author of *The Adventures of Molly Whuppie and Other Appalachian Folktales*

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Q: What inspired you to write a book of folktales?

A: I love reading folktales—Appalachian folktales, tales from all over the world. Their universality, their cultural specificity, their psychological depths are endlessly fascinating to me. I guess I just wanted to get in the game.

Q: Can you talk a little about your writing process in developing these stories?

A: In a lot of ways, it was like any other writing project. I thought about it a long time before I started it; I worked hard on it once I did start; and I did a lot of rewriting. In other words, I went through the usual stages of the writing process: tortured procrastination, obsessive writing, and compulsive rewriting.

Q: Heroines seem to appear less often in children's stories than heroes. Why do you think that is, and why did you choose to write about a girl hero?

A: Folktales mirror the values of the culture in which they are told. And it just doesn't feel right anymore to be telling children stories in which boys slay giants and wield magical objects, while girls stand around looking nice and waiting to get married off. That doesn't reflect our values anymore, and it doesn't reflect our reality.

Q: What do you like most about Molly Whuppie?

A: She's clear-headed. She doesn't waste a lot of time exploring the ambiguities of a situation like I do, being a Libra and an English major. She's brave and modest and compassionate, and she takes care of herself.

Q: Are Molly's stories your own inventions, or do they have a basis on other folktales?

A: The plots, for the most part, are inherited ones. But like other storytellers I felt free to reduce

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here, embellish there, to substitute and change. Storytelling is about passing stories on. It's also about retelling them to reflect your own tastes and your own culture.

Q: So, these stories are based on plots that are, in some cases, several centuries old. What appeal do you think such stories can have for children today?

A: The same appeal they have always had. Children live in a world of giants, some of them frightening. They delight in an unlikely hero like Molly Whuppie who—by magic or trickery or just plain smarts—can take on the giant and win.

Q: You are very connected with storytelling in an oral sense. What was it like putting these types of stories into print?

A: Well, it was like going into my office every day and trying to wrestle a greased pig to the mat. The stories just did not want to be pinned down. Out loud, one way of telling can seem right one day, another way the next, and I was hearing them all in my head. I kept changing and changing back and changing again. Finally I just had to stop thinking about them, print them out and send them in.

Q: How did you choose which stories to include in the collection?

A: For this project I was interested only in tales that had been told in Appalachia. Out of those, I picked the stories I liked best, the ones that seemed to me to be particularly rich or evocative in some way—psychologically or sociologically or in some other way that I couldn't name but nevertheless felt.

Q: What were your sources for the stories in the collection?

A: As I said, I think reading widely in world folktales gave me a good background, as well as a lot of ideas. And my sources for the language in the tales are my neighbors and kinfolks and all the people I heard talking and telling stories around my grandparents' store when I was a kid. And the work of Leonard Roberts, a folklorist who collected tales in eastern Kentucky in the 1940s and '50s, was an important source for Appalachian folktales and how to tell them.

Q: Who are these stories written for?

A: To me, the stories are for everybody. Folktales are and always have been intergenerational. They have as their audience a community, rather than an age group. The community of readers for these stories are people who would like to see a girl hero, people who can appreciate Appalachian language and culture, and people like me who just love reading folktales.

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