

Best-Loved Folktales of the World

By Joanna Cole • Anchor Books, 1983



Reviewed by
Alan Spurgeon

For the teacher in search of a book of folktales to use in the Orff classroom, *Best-Loved Folktales of the World* is surely the right choice. Joanna Cole has selected two hundred folktales from throughout the world. They're wonderfully told and all are appropriate for children. The book starts with an excellent, well-written introduction in which Cole provides the reader with the history of folktales, including what they are and what purpose they serve. It's a helpful short essay on the research into folktales and should be of great interest to users of the book. The collection itself is full of stories, nearly eight hundred pages of them, with a few black-and-white illustrations.

The tales are short; some are less than a full page and others are only a few pages long. In the book, they are arranged by regions of the world. Regional categories include tales from Western Europe, the British Isles, Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, Northern Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, North America, the Caribbean, West Indies, and Central and South America. Although the largest representation is from Europe, especially Western Europe, there are several from Africa and Asia. One will find a good many of the typical folktales most of us learned as children such as "Jack and the Beanstalk" and "The Pied Piper" from the British Isles and "Sleeping Beauty" and "Hansel and Gretel" from Germany along with many less familiar selections.

The African folktales, perhaps due to their relative unfamiliarity, may be of special interest to many readers. These folktales in particular seem to possess an element of mystery and wonder that the European ones don't. Unfortunately, there are only seven

tales from the Middle East; however, the seven selected are famous stories that every child should know, including "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" and "Alladin and the Wonderful Lamp," which are both from the *Arabian Nights*.

My favorite folktale in this book is "Why there are Cracks in the Tortoise's Shell," from the Baila tribe in Africa. It tells the story of a friendship between Mr. and Mrs. Tortoise and Mr. Vulture—a friendship that ends tragically. I've used it in Orff training courses with adults and it's always a hit.

Another excellent African folktale is "Talk" from the Ashanti tribe of West Africa in which the river, stones, bundles of cloth, and other inanimate objects all have the power of speech.

One gem from Northern Europe, in this case Scandinavia, is "The Seal's Skin" from Iceland. This story has the same plot as a British ballad called "The Great Silky of Sule Skerry," wherein a seal comes to the land and assumes the human characteristics of a beautiful young woman and has human children but returns to the sea later in life. It's the inspira-

tion for the 1995 "The Secret of Roan Inish," based on the Irish version of the story and filmed on the Irish coast—truly, it is a good illustration of a folktale that has migrated through various cultures.

The creative Orff-trained teacher interested in using music with the folktales will have no difficulty in finding suitable tales in this excellent collection. The problem lies in the abundance of great stories that children will love. It's difficult to decide exactly which ones to use.

