

## Wile E. Coyote and Other Sly Trickster Tales

Contributed by Terri Windling

Now listen, I'm going to tell you a story. This was back when all the animals were people, before the Human People came. Creator called all them Animal People together and said, "There's going to be a change. New people comin', and you old people got to have new names. You come 'round tomorrow morning, and you can pick your own new names, first ones first until they're gone." And then he goes home to bed. Well that Coyote, he goes back to Mole, his wife, and he's all frettin' now, he's scratchin' and he's thinking hard, and Mole, she's lookin' nervous 'cause there's always trouble close behind when Coyote starts to think. "Mole," he says, "build up that fire, I'm going to stay awake all night. I'm going to be the first in line tomorrow at Creator's door. I'm going to get a strong new name. A better name. A power name. Maybe I'll be Bear," he says. "Or maybe I'll be Salmon. Or maybe I'll be Eagle, and then they'll treat me with respect." So Coyote, he sits down beside that fire and tries to stay awake, but just a little while later he's fast asleep and snoring. Mole lets him sleep. She's thinking if Coyote gets a better name then maybe he'll just up and leave, that mangy, sneaky thing. She waits until the sun is high, and then she goes and wakes him up. Coyote runs right over to Creator, but he's much too late.

"Trickster"

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All the power names are gone. All the little names are gone. The only name that's left now is Coyote -- which nobody wants. Coyote sits down by Creator's fire, quiet now, and sad. It makes Creator start to feel real bad to see him sit like that. He says, "Coyote, my old friend, it's good you have the name you have. That's why I made you sleep so late. I got important work for you. Them Human People are comin' and you got to go and help them out. They won't know anything, those ones, not how to hunt, or fish, or dress, or sing, or dance, or anything. It's your job now to show them how to do it all and do it right." Coyote, he jumps up and he's all smilin' now, with all them teeth. "So I'll be the Big Chief of these new people!" Coyote says. Creator laughs. "Yeah, somethin' like that. But you're still Old Coyote, you know. You're still a fool; that's what you are. But I'll make things easier for you. From now on you'll have these special powers: to change your shape, to hear anything talk except the water, and if you die you can come back to life. Now go and do your work." Coyote left that tipi very happy. He went to find them Human People and to do his work. He went to make things right. . .and that's when all the trouble began.

"Trickster" is an important (often sacred) figure in the folklore of numerous cultures all around the world: a paradoxical creature who is both very clever and very foolish, a culture hero and destructive influence -- often at one and the same time. In the legends of many societies, it's Trickster who is responsible for giving humans fire, language, hunting skills or even life itself. . .but he's also the one who brought us death, hunger, difficult childbirth, illness and other woes. Alan Garner (the great British fantasy writer and folklorist) calls Trickster: "the advocate of uncertainty. . . . He draws a boundary for chaos, so that we can make sense of the rest. He is the shadow that shapes the light." In Europe, Hermes, Loki, Puck and Reynardine the Fox are all different aspects of the Trickster myth; other Tricksters include Maui of Polynesia, Legba and Spider in Africa, Brer Rabbit in Black American lore, and the shape-shifting Foxes found in South America, China and Japan. Trickster is a powerful presence in the legends of most Native American tribes, a divine fool or sacred clown who generally takes one of the following forms: Raven, Rabbit, Hare, Spider, Bluejay, Mink or Coyote.

"Trickster is both serious culture hero and comedian," says anthropologist Richard M. Dorson (Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers), "a regular rascal, always hungry, scheming, greedy, and an old 'letch' to boot. . . . The Indians know his character, relish his predicament, and applaud his come-uppances." In *Giving Birth to Thunder, Sleeping With His Daughter*, the brilliant naturalist writer Barry Lopez (*Of Men and Wolves*) gathers together tales from over forty Native American tribes concerning the most engaging Trickster of them all: Old Man Coyote. "No other personality is as old, as well known, or as widely distributed among the tribes as Coyote. He was the figure of Paleolithic legend among primitive peoples the world over and, though he survives today in Eurasian and African folktales, it is among native Americans, perhaps, that his character achieves its fullest dimension.

In an essay on the psychological roots of the character, Stanley Diamond likened Coyote to a primitive essence of conjoined good and evil; at a time in the history of man when there was no rigid distinction between good and evil, Coyote was." Coyote tales are often very funny, and sometimes quite scatological or overtly sexual. These later tales were left out of early collections by white anthropologists, giving a rather skewed version of this complex and ribald creature. Such Trickster stories are told both as entertainment and as teaching tales -- and in many tribes they are only told during the short, dark winter months. Among such peoples, it is considered unlucky or simply disrespectful to draw Coyote's attention at any another time of year. These tales -- although they vary from teller to teller, and from occasion to occasion -- will often end with a common ritual prayer, asking Creator to bring the end of winter and speed the arrival of spring.

It is during the winter month of February that I sit here in the Arizona desert contemplating Old Man Coyote and his sack full of Trickster tales. Wild coyotes, cousin to the Coyote, prowl by my office door, menace my cats, and howl outside the bedroom windows at night. They are beautiful creatures, wild, untamable, sensibly wary of humankind. It is not at all

unusual to spy coyotes in the Sonoran desert, but there seem to be more and more of them lately -- drawn by my attention, the old tales would say; and I'm inclined to believe them.

It is one thing to read Coyote tales, as I first did years ago, from out of a scholarly book while living in New York City -- quite another to walk this dry, hot land and hear Coyote's eerie song while the night sky arches overhead and mountains ring the horizon. It is in this place that I truly begin to appreciate just how myths are drawn from the bones of each land's geography, from the marrow of the earth. And how very different oral stories become when they are committed to the printed page, divorced from daily life, from wind and rain and claw prints in the dirt. Too often collections of Trickster tales read (to urban and suburban readers) like simple children's fables: This is why the beaver's tale is flat, this is why the sky is filled with stars. What is missing is the sly humor, the ambivalence and duality understood by the indigenous story teller and his or her audience. It is that duality and complexity that makes the Trickster myth cycle as much of a natural force as coyote howls in the desert dark.

Sit down, have some coffee, pay attention now. Here's another one about Coyote. He's walkin' there by that lake yonder, that lake over there by my uncle's place. And Coyote, he's tired, he's hungry, his bag is heavy, and he sees some geese. So he sets this big heavy bag down on the ground. "Coyote, Coyote" say them geese, "what's in that big old heavy bag?" "It's songs," he says. "Coyote," says them geese, "how come you have so many songs?" He puffs up his chest and he smiles with all them teeth and then Coyote says, "I have strong visions, and that's how come I have so many songs." "Well okay then, let's have us a big dance." But Old Coyote shakes his head. "These are powerful songs. You can't mess around with these songs. If you want to dance, you're going to have to dance just like I tell you to dance." "Well okay," them geese agree. They pound down the grass by the edge of that lake and make a big place for dancing. Coyote takes out his dancing sticks. "Now you got to close your eyes," he says. "These songs are medicine songs. If you open your eyes you might get hurt real bad." So the geese all close their eyes and Coyote sings and the geese commence to dance. "Keep your eyes closed!" Coyote says, and he hits one of them geese with his sticks. "Wait, stop!" says Coyote. "This here geese opened his eyes and now he's dead! You'd better all keep your eyes closed." And then them geese, they start to dance again. Coyote snatches another one and commences to strangle him. That geese is squawking, and Coyote says, "That's right, my friends, sing loud as you can!" But one old geese, he opens one eye just a peep, and now he sees what's goin' on. "Run away, brothers!" he cries, and off they go -- but not before that old Coyote fills his belly real good. . . .

I recently asked Midori Snyder, a writer of fantasy novels living in Milwaukee (author of *The Flight of Michael McBride*), for her thoughts about the Trickster. "Jung has argued that the Trickster is 'undifferentiated energy' spinning out in the universe. . .but this couldn't be farther from the truth for the poor dupe who feels all of the Trickster's energy directed at him! Polite society delights in Trickster's boundless energy, his refusal to observe the normal taboos, his gigantic appetites -- which reflect our own appetites in their most unvarnished, unsocialized state.

Uncle Tompa, a Trickster from Tibet, straps a sheep's liver between his legs in order to pose as a woman, seducing a wealthy man into nights of sublime sex and then marriage. As the wedding gifts are packed on Uncle Tompa's horse, and the crowd assembles to wish the "bride" farewell, Uncle Tompa raises his skirts and reveals his true anatomy, much to the merriment of the crowd and the utter shame of the wealthy man. In the Winnebago Trickster cycle (from Radin), the Trickster spends most of the epic engaged in typically bawdy, gluttonous, disastrous activities (my favorite being when he takes his 'member' out of his box where he keeps it and sends it like a torpedo through the water to lodge between the legs of a chief's nubile daughter. It takes an old woman, unscrewing it like a cork with an awl, to get it out!). But in the closing episodes of the epic, the Trickster travels through the land, ordering nature, carving out a place for humans to live within the wonder of it all. Among the Khoi-san of South Africa, Mantis does the same, creating, organizing, shaping the world which man will inhabit. Even Prometheus in European myth is both Trickster (when he steals fire from the gods) and culture hero (when he lifts the darkness for mankind)."

Ellen Kushner (the Boston-based author of the fantasy novel *Thomas the Rhymer*) is the co-producer and host of a nationally-broadcast radio show called "Sound & Spirit," an excellent program which often addresses mythological themes. In a recent show on the subject of Tricksters, she made this interesting observation: ". . .I was having too much of an Us/Them reaction [to Trickster tales] -- you know, the dread: 'How quaint that Other cultures have created these not-quite-animals to express their mythic world-views --' And then it hit me. Bugs! Bugs Bunny! That's the American folk-Trickster! He checks out totally on the international animalometer: superficially a rabbit, he munches carrots and lives in the ground, but he also builds things, knocks on doors, lights matches, impersonates policemen, wears drag. . .and, of course, bonks people with hammers. Now, I have to confess, I didn't really like Bugs Bunny cartoons when I was little -- they were irrational, violent, and made me uncomfortable -- but I sure did watch them all the time. And that's something to remember. Whether you're a 20th-century person watching Trickster on the family altar in your living room, staring into the communal campfire of the movie theater, or hearing the stories in a sweatlodge or under the stars. . .one thing you have to remember is: Trickster is not your friend! Trickster's acts may benefit people, or damage them -- Trickster doesn't really care, as long as the trick is a good one." (For more information on Sound & Spirit or the trickster show, the program's web page is at: <http://www.wgbh.org/wgbh/pages/pri/spirit/>)

Wile E. Coyote (from those old Chuck Jones "Roadrunner" cartoons) is another well-known modern Trickster, sharing many characteristics with Old Man Coyote from the ancient tales: a cleverness matched by foolishness, a tendency for

his tricks to rebound on himself, and the ability to regenerate himself over and over again every time he's squashed flat! (Check out Ian Frazier's hilarious fantasia "Coyote v. Acme," reprinted in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, Vol. IV.) In Asia (as in Great Britain and France), Fox is the animal most associated with Trickster myths. In Chinese legends, foxes can attain magical powers in one of two ways: by long years of arduous study (after which they are rewarded with the power to become human); or by posing as a human man or woman, seducing a member of the opposite sex, then stealing his or her life-force.

Ellen Steiber is the Tucson-based author of *Shadow of the Fox* and other books for children; she has often worked with Japanese kitsune (fox-wife) legends and had this to say about Asian Tricksters: "One thing that occurred to me in working with fox legends is that kitsune assumes many of the same functions as the western devil and his female counterpart, Lilith. All of them shape-shift, tempt and deceive humans, play malicious tricks, and are capable of possessing their victims and driving them to madness. Yet it is only western culture that considers these characters evil. In cultures where they're seen as Tricksters, they are neither wholly benign nor malignant but figures who simply live outside our moral laws and manifest the kind of divine ambiguity that the Greeks assigned their gods -- figures capable of tremendous harm or tremendous good."

This duality, Barry Lopez concurs, is the hardest thing for western readers to understand about figures like Raven, Great Rabbit or Old Man Coyote. "The dichotomy itself is an artificial one, a creation of the western mind." There are several good books about Trickster tales showing the fuller range of this complex archetypal character. (I recommend the Lopez book listed above, *The Trickster* by Paul Radin, *The Incredible Survival of Coyote* by Gary Snyder, *Coyote Tales* by Mourning Dove, *Old Man Coyote* by Clara Kern Bayliss, *African Folktales* by Roger D. Abrahams, *Kitsune* by Niyoshi Nozaki, *Hermes the Thief: The Evolution of a Myth* by Norman O. Brown, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art* by Lewis Hyde, *American Indian Trickster Tales* by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz, *Mythological Trickster Tales* edited by William J. Hynes and William G. Doty, and *Tales of Uncle Tompa: the Legendary Trickster of Tibet* by Rinjing Dorje.)

But even better, I'd like to direct you to some modern fiction making use of Trickster themes, for in this way Trickster is truly brought alive for the modern reader. At the top of the list are two books by Thomas King, a Native writer from Canada whose stories are so clever and sly that he is surely part-Trickster himself. His slim collection *One Good Story That One* contains several hilarious Coyote stories, and Coyote is a prime mover-and-shaker in King's witty magical realist novel *Green Grass, Running Water*. Louis Owens is a part-Cherokee writer whose suspenseful murder-mysteries are infused with myth and magic; the modern Trickster figure in Owen's 1994 novel, *Bone Game*, is a wise-cracking Indian drag-queen at a college in California. Susan Power, of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, includes a young heyoka figure (a kind of sacred clown, who must do everything contrariwise) in her gorgeous, multi-generational novel *The Grass Dancer*; this is a book I highly recommend, a moving and magical love story.

In the fantasy field, if you've got access to a good used bookstore keep an eye out for Zora Greenhaugh's *Contrarywise*, a quirky "imaginary world" fantasy based on Trickster myths from around the world (published in the 1980s). More easily available: the tales of Canadian "urban fantasy" writer Charles de Lint, who has worked extensively with Native legends (mixed with Celtic myths and other folk traditions that have found a home on Canadian soil). Crow and Coyote characters appear in many of de Lint's books, including *Spiritwalk*, *Trader*, *Someplace to Be Flying*, and *Moonlight and Vines*.

In addition to folklore on Coyote, it's also rather fascinating to read about the animals themselves, as I discovered while researching a Trickster character for a novel of my own (*The Wood Wife*), a couple of years ago. When we hear them howling in the desert hills at night, it's not always because they are gathering their cubs, teasing the local dogs, or announcing a kill -- sometimes, according to the researchers who have watched them extensively in the wild, coyotes sing just for the sheer pleasure of it, harmonizing, each one taking a different note which compliments the others.

For naturalistic coyote lore, I recommend *God's Dog* by Hope Ryden, and *Coyote: a breathtaking book of photographs* by Wyman Meinzer. There are also two charming children's picture books about these enigmatic creatures: *Coyote Dreams: a gentle tale about a boy who dances with coyotes in the night* (text by Susan Nines, illustrations by Ronald Himler), and *Cleo and Coyote: about the partnership of a coyote from Utah and a dog from Queens* (text by Elizabeth Levy, terrific illustrations by Southwestern painter Diane Bryer). On the Sound & Spirit "Trickster" program, Ellen Kushner pointed out that we're still captivated by Tricksters in modern society, those "bad boys" of film and music and art, the Jack Nicholsons, Mick Jagger and Dennis Rodmans whose sheer outrageous behavior is exactly what their audiences enjoy.

Not all Trickster energy need be destructive (or self-destructive) however. Mark Wagner, for example, is an artist I think of as having more than a little Trickster energy. This is a man who fills his car with paint when he heads through the desert -- for he likes to stop on empty stretches of remote Western highways to paint eagles, wolves, spirit dancers and other creatures right onto the black asphalt: works that will soon deteriorate with traffic, with wind and sun and rain. And yet, for a brief while, a bit of beauty glows on an isolated roadway -- an anonymous bit of mysterious Trickster magic is left behind.

I have one last Trickster image to share with you before the sun goes down, and the winter ends, and the tales are done.

When I began this article, several weeks ago, I had taken my work and books with me to a ranch several hours drive from here, on a remote part of the Apache reservation in eastern Arizona. I was working out of the bunkhouse while a friend participated in a cattle drive. Early one morning I wandered outside, where the desert spread a vast distance around and it seemed I stood at the center of the world. Horses, maybe a dozen of them, were grazing in a nearby field. The sun was climbing over the cliffs as I perched on an old rusted tank, a cup of coffee in one hand, Mourning Dove's Coyote Tales in the other. All was quiet and very still -- until a huge coyote shot across the land, in hot pursuit of a desert jack-rabbit of equally enormous size. This spooked the milling horses, who turned and thundered in my direction. I jumped and ran, and only when I reached the bunkhouse did I turn again. The horses had stopped, abruptly. There was an electric wire between them and me. My jeans and my book were drenched with coffee. I could almost hear Coyote laugh. Good trick, Coyote. But he, of course, was now nowhere in sight.

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