Planting the Seed

The Role of Myth, Legend and Culture in Adolescent Literacy

David Bowles
Adolescents and Reading

- Eight years as middle school English teacher
- Male students consistently struggled in reading
- Personal experience and research uncovered the fact that
  - Boys take longer than girls to develop literacy skills
  - Boys need more one-on-one time with teacher
  - Boys believe reading is harder in MS than in elementary
  - Boys claim reading gets less enjoyable as they get older
  - Boys view reading as a feminine, boring and useless activity
  - Boys often don’t see themselves as readers
I had always loved stories and reading, so I pondered what had inspired that love in me as a boy.

- My grandmother’s storytelling was key, I realized.
- Her tales had a timeless, spooky quality.
- They made connections to things I valued or emotions I found engaging.
- At the end of each story, I wanted to know more.
  - “And then what happened? What were they thinking about? What did people say?”
- My grandmother would often graciously make more bits of story to answer my questions.
Personal Reflection: Culture

- I also realized that one aspect of my grandmother’s storytelling that had appealed to my cousins and me the most was her interweaving of our unique cultural heritage. Elements of southern American gothic tales were threaded through with Mexican-American oral traditions to form a weft that reflected who we were and where we’d come from.
Personal Reflection: Reading

- Epiphany: this love of story had transferred to my early reading.
  - Fantasy novels like *The Chronicles of Narnia*
  - Adventure books like *Doc Savage*
  - Science fiction works by Robert Heinlein and others
  - Hero and horror comics like *Batman* and *Swamp-Thing*
- It was clear to me that there was a connection between my grandmother’s folktales and this sort of reading.
Personal Reflection: Academics

- I then realized that the sort of fiction I loved as a boy had served as a gateway into more traditional literature that was packed with adventure, mystery, horror and action.
  - *Huckleberry Finn, The Call of the Wild, Moby Dick, Frankenstein, Dracula*

- I also considered my interest in anthropology and history. I realized that I had always been drawn to mythological stories about heroes and monsters; the legends of other cultures, especially those I found good and spooky, intrigued me well into my college years. A class by Dr. Glazer had rekindled my interest in folklore as well.
Personal Reflection: Mexico

- Finally, I asked myself what had inspired my love of Mexican culture (beyond simply getting married to a woman from that country).
  - The stories my mother-in-law would tell her grandchildren (and me!)
  - The stories my wife would tell our kids (and me!)
  - *In xóchitl, in cuícatl*—the power of the creative process to refine and transform our identities
I began to use the sorts of stories that I probably would have found compelling at that age (hello!)

- *Stories That Must Not Die*
- *Flour from Another Sack*
- *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*
- *Stories from Mexico*

I also discovered tons of great spooky stories by Latin-American authors like Horacio Quiroga and Carlos Fuentes.
Problems with Folktales

- I needed to teach short story elements. This reminded me of my questions to my grandmother.
- I realized I needed to turn legends into literary fiction.
- I figured this could help bridge the gap between the oral culture of my students and the literature culture.
- I added setting, characters, dialogue.
- I often took social issues or historical problems and imbedded the legends in those contexts.
Results

- All students became more engaged, especially boys.
- A renewed interest in their families’ stories took this engagement outside the classroom; they did field research, ethnographic work.
- The folktales they brought to share with the class were awesome, and they led to powerful writing assignments in which they, too, transformed tales into stories.
- The work I did with those 7th graders stayed with me, and some of the stories I crafted were eventually included in *The Seed: Stories from the River’s Edge* years later.
“THE SEED: STORIES FROM THE RIVER'S EDGE takes an immersive plunge into the magic depths of the border experience, crisscrossing the lines between fantasy and reality, truth and fiction, the natural and supernatural. With the assured skill of master artisans, David Bowles and Angélica Maldonado pull new truths from old myths in flowing, poetic prose. Seamlessly drawn from tradition but inflected with a contemporary dialect, Bowles and Maldonado effortlessly capture life lived in the in-between spaces of the borderlands. Provocative and essential, these elemental tales echo in the heart and mind.”

-Alvaro Rodriguez, co-screenwriter of MACHETE and SHORTS
April 2011. A boy faces a ghost dog, armed only with his father’s memory. A mother must find the strength to free her mermaid daughter. A teenager stands up to her manipulative uncle, despite the consequences. A woman drowns her children and pays the ultimate price. A man must help a town learn to stave off dark forces that would steal all their children. A girl must accept her role as the protector of her people.

By turns humorous, dark, exciting and thoughtful, these sixteen tales—ranging from retellings of urban legends to original explorations of the culture and mythos of northern Mexico and the US Southwest—take readers to the heart of a culture for which struggle against all odds is a way of life. The extraordinary circumstances in which the characters of these stories find themselves, the way in which each person seeks to face the mysteries of life, illuminates the weakness and strengths of all human beings.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Siren Call</td>
<td>contextualized legend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Black Dog</td>
<td>legend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Seed</td>
<td>realistic fiction with Angélica Maldonado</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Origin of <em>La Llorona</em></td>
<td>contextualized legend</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bringing down the Witch</td>
<td>contextualized legend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jealous Spirits, Thundering Gun</td>
<td>original fantasy based on Mexican mythological creature</td>
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<tr>
<td>Through the Cornfields</td>
<td>original fantasy based on Mexican mythological creature</td>
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<td>Twenty-one Crosses</td>
<td>memoir</td>
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<td>Storyteller</td>
<td>original magical realism based on Mexican mythological creature</td>
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<tr>
<td>Queen of Heaven</td>
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<td>The Fifth Sun Sets</td>
<td>parable based on Mexican mythological creature</td>
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<td>The Ride</td>
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<td>Iron Horse, Mythic Horn</td>
<td>original fantasy based on Native American and Chinese myth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Devil at the Disco</td>
<td>contextualized legend</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boyfriend’s Death</td>
<td>contextualized legend</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Monster of Donna Lake</td>
<td>original fantasy</td>
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# Contextualizing Legend Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STORY</th>
<th>LEGEND</th>
<th>HISTORICAL CONTEXT</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Siren Call”</td>
<td>Bathing on Good Friday turns you into a fish or mermaid</td>
<td>Monterrey, Nuevo León, México in the 1950s and 60s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Black Dog”</td>
<td>Cadejo (spirit dog sent to do harm)</td>
<td>Fight for educational equity in Texas during the 1950s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Bringing down the Witch”</td>
<td>A moving bright light is a witch and can be brought down from the sky.</td>
<td>Mid-1800s, when former Texas Rangers collected Native American scalps for the Mexican government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Ride”</td>
<td>Spirit of deceased nun is given a ride</td>
<td>Highway 281 in the 1980s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Devil at the Disco”</td>
<td>The Devil dances with a disobedient teen, who dies</td>
<td>McAllen and South Padre Island in the 1990s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Boyfriend’s Death”</td>
<td>Escaped lunatic kills boyfriend</td>
<td>Donna, Texas, in the late 1970s</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Cadejo from “The Black Dog”
Other Works
February 2012

May 2011

Dozens of unique voices combine in a harmony of Mexican and American, of magical and ordinary, of tragedy and triumph. From established writers to emerging talents, the contributors to this volume represent the depth and beauty of a community that is just beginning to make itself heard.
May 2012

Who protects our precious fields of corn? What leaps from the darkness when you least suspect it? Which spirit waits for little kids by rivers and lakes? From the *ahuizotl* to the *xocoyoles*—and all the imps, ghosts and witches in between—this illustrated bilingual encyclopedia tells you just what you need to know about the things that go bump in the night in Mexico and the US Southwest.

¿Quién protege nuestras milpas preciosas? ¿Qué cosa salta de la oscuridad cuando menos te lo esperes? ¿Cuál espíritu acecha a los pequeños cerca de los ríos y los lagos? Desde el *ahuizotl* a los *xocoyoles*—y demás diablillos, fantasmas y brujas—esta enciclopedia ilustrada bilingüe te dice justo lo que debes saber sobre las cosas que dan miedo en México y en el suroeste de los Estados Unidos.
Ordering information

For ordering soft-cover copies of *The Seed*, contact Edward Wilson at Absey & Co.— ewilson@absey biz

For ordering soft-cover copies of *Donna Hooks Fletcher, Along the River* or *Mexican Bestiary/Bestiario mexicano*, contact Jorge Ávila at VAO Publishing— publishing@valartout.org

For ordering *hard-cover* (bound) copies of any of these titles, contact Pat Anderson at Overlooked Books—(254) 289-3310 or texasbookman@yahoo.com
D’Angelo Chronicles

An adult science fiction series
D'Angelo Chronicles

category: adult fiction, news

Humanity stands poised at the brink. Our next steps will either destroy us or elevate us to a new stage in our development. It is a crucial time: The actions of every person matter. A single family could tip the balance.

This is the story of that family.

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About the Series

D'Angelo Chronicles is an intellectually engaging, heart-pounding science fiction series from the mind of author David Bowles. Books I and II are available now in their original binding; deluxe editions with extended features will be released in January 2012 to coincide with the publication of The Rising Red.