



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1993 Volume II: Folktales

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## **Integrating Folktales with Light Up the Sky, New Haven's Fifth Grade Reading Text**

Curriculum Unit 93.02.11  
by Jean Sutherland

As I am about to complete my first year using New Haven's literature-based reading program, it seems clear that the program, which is in effect throughout elementary schools, provides a variety of opportunities to integrate a curriculum unit designed to develop an understanding and appreciation of various American folktales. In this unit, I will suggest a general framework for including such tales and will present specific suggestions regarding actual tales and the manner in which they might be presented to the class.

Presently, I teach a group of twenty-seven fifth grade students ranging in age from ten to thirteen. All but one is African American or Hispanic. They are of varying ability and come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Though most have relatively adequate basic skills and many have great potential, most show a substantial lack of general academic knowledge and vocabulary. It appears obvious that, by increasing the scope and quality of the reading material to which they are exposed, we will help to develop both of these areas.

Though naturally in this first year I have found some problems with the series, I feel that the Harcourt Brace Jovanovich material takes a positive step toward increasing both the general knowledge and vocabulary of my pupils, not to mention their appreciation of various forms of literature. Its stories also provide a wide range of topics which the teacher can expand to meet the particular needs of students. This unit on folktales attempts to do this. It includes primarily tales with Native American, African American, Asian American, Puerto Rican, and West Indian roots, them relevant to most pupils in my fifth grade, self-contained classroom.

Besides their value as examples of oral literature, it also appears that many of these tales can provide additional insights into topics covered in our social studies program which investigates various developments in United States history. The folklore of Native Americans would positively augment our examination of various Native American tribes. As we investigate the roots of slavery, its history in America, and its eventual elimination, African American folktales can play an enriching role. The stories of Pecos Bill, Paul Bunyan, and John Henry integrate easily with the development of our country. As we approach more current times, tales from Puerto Rico and the West Indies can play a role in understanding and appreciating Americans from these regions. The same is true of material from any country whose people immigrated to America. By integrating such a continuing study of relevant folktales, both academic objectives and personal feelings of self-esteem could be reinforced. Besides the obvious significance these tales would have to our curriculum, most are pertinent to the cultural background of the pupils I teach. Others could open opportunities to further

understanding and appreciation of other groups.

Specifically, this unit suggests a series of folktales which demonstrate elements of the six major unit headings utilized in the fifth grade reading text: *Light Up the Sky* . Some general approaches to each tale will be offered along with a few more specific lesson plans. The particular unit topics include: “Challenges”, “Trials”, “Yesterdays”, “Shenanigans”, “Lifelines”, and “Flights”.

Tales will follow the flow of the reading text, not the sequence of the social studies curriculum. The tale itself, its origin, content, message and any other related learnings will be the focus. However, tales are selected with the various aspects of the social studies curriculum, mentioned previously, in mind. At times the presentation may coincide with our work in social studies. At other times, they will build upon earlier learnings, and finally, they may serve as background for historical material to be covered later.

The amount of time and depth devoted to investigating pertinent background material related to each tale may vary greatly and will not be inserted merely for the sake of relating it to our social studies curriculum. In fact, some tales might have no historical relationship to an actual group, individual, or event, but may illustrate moral values or actions that could motivate or aid the child in sorting out the real-life material being covered.

Ideally, I envision the child never being informed, and perhaps never being fully aware, that an intentional link has been made between the folktales she/he has read and discussed and the content of her/his social studies curriculum. While I feel that both areas nicely complement each other, I also strongly feel the basic essence of each must be preserved. Relating an African American folktale to a discussion of early slavery should not be an artificially imposed experience.

Though original approaches appropriate to individual tales will be suggested, attempts will be made to integrate much of the framework of the H.B.J. format which fits easily into my unit.

As gradually the number of tales covered increases, pupils should acquire a greater understanding and appreciation of oral tradition. Similarities and differences among various groups should become evident. Many tales should begin to exhibit similar patterns of development and the moral messages they convey. Recognizing and discussing these will be an integral goal of this unit.

I have chosen to summarize each unit in the H.B.J. text, followed by suggested folktales which in some way relate to the text’s basic theme. I also include a few approaches the teacher might employ in developing various skills and understandings pertinent to that particular tale. Details on sources are found in the bibliography.

## **UNIT ONE—“CHALLENGES”**

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This first unit presents material in which various challenges are met by the characters involved. The three themes include: “Challenges in School”, “Playing to Win” and “Understanding Others”. Among the values demonstrated are persistence, hard work, flexibility, and understanding. Many folktales feature these themes. I suggest the following.

### **“King of De World”—Zora Neal Hurston— *Talk That Talk***

Jack successfully defends his claim that he is king of the world against the reigning lion. This African American tale is short enough to copy or read to the class. Besides discussing Jack’s approach to the challenge, the tale invites an investigation of Zora Neal Hurston’s contribution to the collection and perpetuation of African American folktales.

### **“Anansis’ Riding Horse, A Jamaican Folktale”—Adapted and retold by Marian E. Barnes— *Talk That Talk***

Anansis, the spider, the ultimate trickster, is both a hero and a villain in many African folktales. Though he demonstrates negative traits, especially greed, he is also a likable rascal. He illustrates the many strengths and weaknesses we all possess. He is both magical and human. His name is spelled in many ways: Anansi, Anansis, Anancy, Brer Nancy, and Ananse, but he always remains the tricky spider. Children seem to be intrigued by him. He’s fun.

In this tale Anansis tricks Brer Tiger into becoming his riding horse in order to best the tiger in their competition for Linda’s affection. While investigating Anansis’s tactics, pupils might examine the historical role played by Jamaica in the development of slavery in North America.

### ***Grandma’s Latkes* —Malka Drucker**

Besides relating the story of Antiochus, Mattatheas, and the Maccabees, this story illustrates the process of oral transmission, as Grandma tells Molly the traditional story of Hanukkah while they prepare potato pancakes for the holiday meal. Though there is a challenge within the defiance of Mattatheas and the Maccabees, the main value seems to relate to increasing an understanding and appreciation of Jewish customs and culture. A further investigation of Hanukkah and the Jewish people could be a natural outgrowth. There is an actual recipe for latkes which pupils might follow. Collecting their own family recipes and perhaps sharing them or the finished product could be a positive related activity.

## **UNIT TWO—“TRIALS”**

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Forced to fly a plane solo, endure the threat of a tornado, or solve the mysterious theft of a valuable ruby, the characters in these stories triumph in the end. Themes include: “Nature’s Fury”, “Problems and Solutions”, and “Flying Solo”.

### **“Spider and His Son”— *The Black Cloth***

Disgusted with the fact that his lazy, selfish son does not live up to his father’s reputation, Ananze renounces him during a great famine and hurls him far from home. After encountering a magical boa who gives him tremendous riches, the son is reformed. Eventually Ananze and his son are reunited and live in splendor until Ananze’s curiosity eventually breaks the enchantment.

After examining the dynamics of this tale, pupils might investigate the present day conditions of famine in Africa and attempts of the United States to alleviate the problem.

### **“The Flea”— *Spanish American Folktales***

A poor sheepherder, aided by an ant, a beetle, and a mouse, solves the secret of the boa-skin tambourine.

The trickery of his animal helpers insures him a wealthy future. The shepherd possesses many positive traits worthy of group discussion. Since the tale itself originates among the Pueblos of New Mexico, it fits nicely into the pupil's study of Native American and Spanish influence in that area of the United States.

**"How the Slaves Helped Each Other"**—Retold by Williara J. Faulkner— *Talk That Talk*.

Though Sister Dicey's life as a slave was filled with trials and tribulations, her death is viewed as a liberation. With limited resources, her friends and family conduct a glorious funeral. The tale includes the words to a familiar spiritual, "Going to Walk All Over God's Heaven."

This tale provides many opportunities to discuss life during slavery along with the qualities that allowed survival. The song's lyrics might be discussed, learned and even compared with spirituals containing similar messages.

## **UNIT THREE—"YESTERYEAR"**

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This unit's material develops an understanding and appreciation of America's past, especially its women. Themes include: "Early America", "Women Who Led the Way", and "Interpreting the Past".

**"The Role of the Griot"—D'jimo Kouyate— *Talk That Talk***

Though not actually a tale, this piece presents a clear picture of the role played by the African storyteller and the debt owed him by his present day descendants. It encourages an investigation of one's history, emphasizing that a lack of knowledge is humiliation. Further examining the role of storytellers in other cultures and perhaps developing and telling their own stories seems a natural outgrowth for pupils.

**"The Black Cloth"—Karen C. Hatch— *The Black Cloth***

The orphan, Aiwa, with the usual positive qualities of folktale orphans suffering under the rule of a mean stepmother who her to journey forth until she is able to wash a black cloth white, achieves success only when her song calls forth the assistance of her dead mother. Besides emphasizing the bond between mother and daughter, we see a folktale woman who "led the way" which might be compared with the way in which modern women lead. Children might also compare Aiwa to stepchildren in familiar fairy tales, as well as the roles played by dead mothers, fairy godmothers, or other symbols. Recounting how other females have helped in their lives might be a further development.

**"The Case of the Missing Strawberry Pie"—Jackie Torrence as told by Marian E. Barnes— *Talk That Talk***

In a more modern setting, Ms. Torrence gives us a picture of her youthful life in North Carolina. She emphasizes the importance of storytelling in her youth and the merger of African and Cherokee stories in her background, as she highlights her inability as a child to resist the minister's strawberry pie and her mother's creative method of solving the crime.

Jackie Torrence is a storyteller whom children might investigate further. The theme of childhood "thefts" might be expanded by having children tell of their own transgressions.

## UNIT FOUR—“SHENANIGANS”

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Humorous and lighthearted, this unit’s themes include: “Going Buggy”, “Moonlight”, and “Unforgettable Performances”. Any tale that is fun will fit well here. These are three I have chosen.

### **“The Leaf Monster”—Spanish-American Folktales**

Another trickster, Coyote, playfully outwits two farmers and a rancher. A very likable character, Coyote’s antics should be enjoyed by children. Set in New Mexico near the Rio Grande, this fable gives pupils a feel for the Spanish and Pueblo flavor of this rural area, fitting well into our United States studies. Classes might enjoy comparing Coyote with Anansi.

### **“Bush Got Ears, A Tale from Guyana”—Naomi Clark— *Talk That Talk***

As with the characters in this unit’s “Unforgettable Performances”, Buru Tiger’s ability to at last successfully imitate Mals voice requires much skill and persistence. When he carries off and devours the mother’s two pretty daughters, she gradually comes to see the beauty in the daughter she has neglected to this point because of her supposed ugliness.

The lessons of this tale provide easy discussion. There is also a short introductory piece by Naomi Clarke in which she discusses how this story moved with her ancestors from their home in Nigeria to slavery in Guyana, suggesting more specific examination of the routes covered during the period of slave trade in the Americas.

### **“Spread the Word: A Story Teller’s Rap”—Linda Gross— *Talk That Talk***

Though this is not a folktale, this piece extols the virtues of the storyteller in the popular rap form. Mentioning a number of modern day rap groups, the storyteller asks them to step aside for what has always been around.

Pupils should have no problem relating to this piece and by now should recognize some of the folktale characters mentioned. Discussion of rap as a form of storytelling could easily follow the initial readings. Investigating the relationship between the African griot and the modern rapper should be fruitful. Pupils might present the rap orally in their individual style along with their own rap versions of family stories.

## UNIT FIVE—“LIFELINES”

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In an attempt to foster an understanding and appreciation of our environment’s importance, this unit itself contains a number of folktales revolving around the tall tale characters of Johnny Appleseed and Paul Bunyan, along with the legend of the African baobab tree. Further readings on these tall tale heroes are easily available, along with others I will suggest. Besides the fact that most children enjoy tall tales and they easily motivate imitation, they can turn pupils’ attention to a more realistic view of our country’s early expansion.

### **“Hammerman”— *American Tall Tales***

Wielding his tremendous hammer, John Henry almost single-handedly leads the development of the United States railroad system until he encounters his final opponent, the steam drill. Though John Henry is victorious in their famous competition, he dies in the process.

Once the tale has been discussed, the class might investigate the early impact of the railroad in America and research the different groups that were employed to build it.

### **“Pecos Bill and His Bouncing Bride”— *Time for Fairy Tales***

The legendary cowboy hero, Pecos Bill, loses his bride-to-be when the bucking of his jealous horse Widow-Maker launches an uncontrollable week-long bouncing spree. When the ordeal finally concludes, Slue-Foot Sue no longer loves Bill who departs heartbroken to an uncertain end.

Investigating the contributions of early American cowboys, especially African American cowboys, could follow naturally.

### **“John Henry”—Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter)— *Talk That Talk***

Though some editing may be necessary for fifth graders, this song, by one of America’s best known blues-folksingers, further develops the legend of John Henry. Investigating the life and influence of this famous African American would have many positives for students.

## **UNIT SIX—“FLIGHTS”**

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This unit examines our fascination with flight, from flying kites to exploring space. Its themes include: “On the Breeze”, “Space Flight”, and “Beyond the Solar System”.

### ***Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky* —Faith Ringgold**

Based upon the tale that, while gravely ill, Harriet Tubman dreamed of flying to freedom with a circle of ladies dressed in white, the author tells us of an eight-year-old girl’s magical flight through the sky with her little brother. Their voyage takes them through the experiences endured by slaves as they traveled North on the Underground Railroad. The illustrations are marvelous.

A great deal of information, including songs, is available to further pupils’ understanding of Harriet Tubman and the historical significance of the Underground Railroad.

### **“Icarus and Daedalus”— *Time for Fairy Tales***

Ignoring his father’s warning not to fly too high, Icarus plunges to his death when the heat of the sun melts the wax holding together the wings his father has built. Though this well-known Greek myth is obviously not an American folktale, I feel it fits well here. It provides opportunity to discuss the pros and cons of “flying too high”, as well as allowing us to examine the often repeated admonition to heed the advice of your elders. Regarding its relationship to our study of United States history, pupils might research early attempts at flight, centering on the accomplishments of the Wright Brothers.

### **“The People Could Fly”— *The People Could Fly***

A sad yet inspiring tale of African American slaves who had retained (from their native Africa) the power to fly. Weighted down by the cruelty of their oppressors, they finally rose into the sky and flew to freedom while those who could not fly preserved the memory of those who could.

This tale, along with the other five in the final section of this book, could easily inspire further study and

discussion of the struggles endured and the courage displayed by African American slaves.

Originally, I had intended to include a list of alternate tales from which the teacher could choose selections pertinent to each unit. After discovering the wide variety of tales available with overlapping internal themes which could be developed in connection to a number of different units, I have decided to include only the titles of the various collections which I have examined. From these books and others the teacher may discover, there are more than enough appropriate additional tales available for use.

## Suggested Lesson Plans

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In the three more specific lesson plans which I have developed, I have tried to focus on three separate areas: sharing an established tale, creating an original tale based upon the circumstances experienced by others, and, finally, gathering and sharing personal family tales. There is considerable overlapping of skills and objectives developed in all three.

### Lesson One

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#### **Title**

Sharing Folktales with Others

#### **Objectives**

Develop the desire and ability to share established folktales with others.

Rudimentary knowledge of a particular folktale's origin.

Ability to use props or costuming to enhance the sharing of folktales with others.

By the time this lesson is used, pupils already should have become familiar with hearing the teacher read or tell a variety of folktales. The pupil also will have read a number of tales independently. If this has been done, it should not be a difficult task motivating each pupil to select a folktale of her/his own for telling or reading. Teaming pupils with children from one or more primary grades should provide added incentive. A variety of books containing appropriate tales should be made available. Most of those listed in the bibliography are suitable or the teacher may have a favorite of his/her own. Pupils who are initially reluctant or are unable to perform an entire tale may be teamed with another child to share the presentation of one tale. There is considerable benefit to be gained from such a cooperative venture.

After each pupil has made a selection, each must be given time to become familiar with the tale. When this is achieved, practice time is necessary. Discussing the advantages of telling vs. reading might be explored by the class as a whole with each individual or team making an independent decision regarding their approach.

The qualities which lead to an interesting presentation should also be shared with the entire group. The teacher might demonstrate various examples of appropriate voice and presentation.

After sharing and perfecting their selected tales in small groups, at least some might be presented to the whole class for positive evaluation and discussion before moving on to their primary grade audience. Pupils should also be encouraged to present their tales to family members at home. Some pupils might be encouraged to include props or a degree of costuming as long as it does not detract from the basic tale.

The exact location and scheduling of these folktale sharing sessions must be worked out among the teachers involved. Before these sessions there also should be some preliminary discussion of mutual appreciation and respect with pupils of each participating classroom.

Tales might also be recorded for future use and to allow each pupil to hear her/his own presentation.

The lesson will take at least two classroom sessions of about 45 minutes each. More time will be needed if some work is not done independently.

## Lesson Two

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### **Title**

Expanding *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*

### **Objectives**

Appreciation and understanding of risks taken and sacrifices made by those involved in the Underground Railroad.

Ability to research data on topics suggested in *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* .

Ability to create an imaginative folktale based upon the pupil's fantasy and the concrete facts of history.

As has been mentioned previously, many folktales can provide additional insights into topics covered in our social studies curriculum. This is particularly true regarding the historical roots of African Americans in Africa and their history here in the United States. Besides the concrete knowledge they can develop, these tales often help to establish personal feelings of empathy with the past, along with a personal pride for what was accomplished. This is especially important for the pupils I teach. *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* is a prime example of such a tale. (A brief summary is available under "Unit Six—Flights".)

During Cassie's fantasy trip along the Underground Railroad many topics are presented in print and through picture which could easily motivate further pupil investigation:

"What was life like as a slave sailing from Africa?"



“How were slaves sold and how did they feel during such an ordeal?”

“Describe a slave wedding.”

“Did slaves really want to learn how to read and write?”

“How did slaves escape?”

“Who hid them along the way?”

“What was their actual route?”

These and other points developed in the tale, including the specifics of Harriet Tubman’s life, could lead pupils to further develop their knowledge of this period. After reading the story they will develop a similar list from which they will make selections for their individual or team research. Obvious sources for such investigation will include the school and city library, the Josten Computer’s Compton’s Encyclopedia, and social studies and classroom texts.

Once this research is gathered, material seems best presented through group discussion or informal reporting. The teacher might wish to augment information with further readings, lecture, or various types of audio-visual material.

Children should now be ready for the final phase of this lesson in which they create their own original tale, presented as though their characters lived during the time of the Underground Railroad. Although the foundation of their tales will be fact, hopefully they also will reflect the emotions which pupils extracted from their historical research.

The results should be shared in some way with other members of the classroom and perhaps with a larger audience depending on the situation.

The entire lesson should take at least three classroom sessions of 45 minutes each.

## **Lesson Three**

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### ***Title***

Creating Family Folktales

### ***Objectives***

Further understanding of oral literature and its transmission.

An appreciation of family sharing, in the present and from generation to generation.

After pupils have been exposed to a variety of folktales and are familiar with the process of oral tradition, the

teacher will tell an interesting personal tale or two from his/her childhood or even more distant past. The further back the tale can be traced, the better.

It should now be relatively easy to motivate pupils to tell their own tales from earlier childhood, though it be only a few years ago. When this is concluded, pupils will be asked to delve further into the past by questioning older members of their family regarding intriguing anecdotes from their lives or stories which they had been told by others. If the class has been exposed to *Grandma's Latkes* and/or "The Case of the Missing Strawberry Pie" (previously mentioned), pupils should be aware of how stories are transmitted from generation to generation within families. If they have not yet been covered, at least one, or another story illustrating this process, should be introduced.

Each pupil would prepare at least one short tale to share with the whole class. The children might choose among a variety of approaches to his/her presentation. The pupil might memorize the events and tell them directly, or recorded and played, to the class, or the material could be written out and read orally, or even dittoed for individual silent reading. If equipment is available, a recording of the original teller could be made and played to the group or perhaps the family member could come to class in order to tell the tale directly to the class.

As a further development, pupils might create illustrations to accompany their own story. These pictures could be used in connection with an oral presentation or combined with a written text to form a small booklet or even part of a class collection. Each piece also would be titled by the pupil and could include any necessary words of explanation.

No matter what the completed form, the final stories should be shared. Possibilities which go beyond the mentioned classroom sharing include: presenting the stories to members of other classrooms, individually or as a group, holding a sharing night at which pupils and/or family members would share each tale, and finally taping all or a portion of the stories and allowing pupils to take them home to share with family and friends.

Finally, when all stories are completed and shared, pupils might hold a general discussion in which they examine the similarities and differences existing among their stories:

"Who are the heroes?"

"What are his/her characteristics?"

"What type of people, if any, are villains? What are they like?"

"How do the stories make you feel?"

Whatever their conclusions, have pupils speculate on possible influencing factors.

## Bibliography

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Except where noted, all of the references listed here could be used easily by most fifth grade pupils. They provide excellent sources for additional tales which teachers might wish to include.

Abrahams, Roger D. *Afro American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World* . New York: Pantheon Books, 1985. Divides tales into interesting categories such as “Minding Somebody Else’s Business and Sometimes Making It Your Own.”

Alegria, Ricardo E. *The Three Wishes: A Collection of Puerto Rican Folktales* . New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969. A wonderful collection of Puerto Rican tales. Illustrates the similarities of themes and characters among tales.

Arbuthnot, Mary Hill. *Time for Fairy Tales* . New Jersey: Scott Foresman, 1961. Large collection of traditional tales from all over the world. Also includes fables, myths, and more modern fanciful tales.

Bascom, William R. *African Dilemma Tales* . Paris: Moulton Publishers, 1975. Short tales which leave listener with alternative solutions or opinions. Provoke discussion. Solution is sometimes given by the narrator.

Burrison, John A. *Storytellers—Folktales and Legends from the South*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989. Many tales contain language inappropriate for fifth graders. Contains interesting chapter on Cherokee Indian myths.

Coffin, Tristran P. and Cohen, Hennig. *Folklore in America* . New York: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1966. Variety of tales including African, Asian, Puerto Rican, and European stories.

Drucker, Malka. *Grandma’s Latkes* . New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992. Excellent illustration of how oral tradition exists in a modern setting. Grandma tells Molly the story of Hanukkah.

Edmonds, Margot and Clark, Ella. *Voices of the Wind—Native American Legends* . New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1989. Divides tales into geographical sections of North America, primarily the U.S. Also includes tribe of origin.

Gross, Idrida and Barnes, Marian E. *Talk That Talk —An Anthology of African-American Storytelling*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989. Contains a variety of pieces, from a variety of storytellers, from many different places. Contents range from the traditional tales of Anansi to “Spread the Word: A Storyteller’s Rap.” Brief biographical notes give us interesting and helpful information on the presenter, and sometimes author, of each piece. Many selections apply to this unit.

Hamilton, Virginia. *The People Could Fly—American Black Folktales* . New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985. Fun, scary, thought provoking, and inspiring are words to describe this wonderful collection of African American tales.

Hatch, Karen C. *The Black Cloth : A Collection of African American Folktales*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987. An interesting selection of African tales.

Pejoan de Van Etten, Teresa. *Spanish American Folktales* . Little Rock: August House, 1990. Spanish American tales which also reflect Pueblo influence in the New Mexico area. Includes anecdotes on each tale.

Ringgold, Faith. *Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky* . New York: Crown, Inc., 1992. Follows eight-year-old Cassie’s fantasy journey along an Underground Railroad route. Contains a wealth of factual material which might be developed further. A short section on Harriet Tubman and the actual routes followed is included along with a list of possible additional readings.

Stoutenburg, Adrien. *American Tall Tales* . New York: Viking Press, 1966. Contains traditional tales of eight American folk heroes. Interesting, active illustrations.

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