



“Where Did I See That Story?”

Using *The Storyteller’s Sourcebooks*
to Locate Folktales

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You remember hearing a story about a turtle being carried aloft by two birds. The turtle is holding onto a stick in order to be carried, but he opens his mouth to brag about his flying and falls. You would like to share this story with your class as a discussion starter about the fact that you need to keep your mouth shut at times. But where on earth can you find that tale?

Storyteller's Sourcebook to the rescue! This two volume set allows you to look up tales by subject, title, or by motif. *The Storyteller's Sourcebook: A Subject, Title and Motif Index to Folklore Collections for Children* (Margaret Read MacDonald, Gale Research 1982) indexes 556 folktale collections and 389 picture books. The book is arranged according to the Stith Thompson Motif-Index of Folk-Literature. But you do not need to know anything about a motif-index to use this tool. Enter by looking up a subject or a tale title. This will direct you to a motif-number, where you will find a summary of the tale and bibliographical information about its sources.

Looking for a variant of "Cinderella"? Look for "Cinderella" in the title index. This will refer you to *Motif R221 Heroine's threefold flight from ball*. There you will find summaries and sources for 36 Cinderella variants from around the world. This is an invaluable source if you want to prepare a comparative unit on a folktale.

Want a story to add to your unit on frogs? Just look up "frogs" in the subject index. You will find references for sixty-three stories about frogs there.

And for even more citations consult *The Storyteller's Sourcebook: A Subject, Title and Motif-Index to Folklore Collections for Children, 1983-1999* (Margaret Read MacDonald and Brian Sturm, Gale Research 2000). This companion tool indexes books published between 1983 and 1999. Note that this is a *supplement* to the 1982 book, not a new edition. For complete coverage, consult both.

What is a motif-index? This indexing system was devised by Indiana University scholar Stith Thompson. The Finnish folklorist Antti Aarne had already created a type index (*The Types of the Folktale, Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1973*). That assigned one number to each tale. For example Cinderella is *Type 510 Cinderella and Cap O' Rushes*. Stith Thompson saw the need for a more detailed indexing system for folktales, however. So he created a motif index: *The Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*. This index assigns a number to each motif within a tale. The Cinderella story includes motifs such as S3I Cruel stepmother; C76I.3 Tabu: staying too long at ball; H36I.1 Slipper test; and R22I Heroine's threefold flight from ball. Because of the arrangement of the motif-index, it is easy to scan nearby motifs for similar stories. You do not need to understand anything about the motif-arrangement to use the book. Just enter through the subject or title indexes.

Why did folklorists go to all this trouble? The use of motif and type numbers allows us to compare folktales even across language barriers. When I was teaching in Northeastern Thailand I needed to find some local folktales that my students could tell to children.

There were several volumes of tales in the university library that had been collected by folklore students. But they were all in Thai or Lao. Fortunately those students had provided the Stith Thompson Motif-Index numbers for the stories they collected. I could simply look up the numbers in my Motif-Index and know exactly what the story was all about! Thus I was able to select those stories I knew would be fun to tell to young children, and ask my assistant to translate just those few tales for me.

Many folktale collections and folktale picture books provide notes giving motif and tale numbers. Using these numbers, you can investigate other versions of the tales. When I choose a new story to tell, I find it helpful to research other variants of the story. Different versions will provide unique ways of looking at the story, and often I discover delightful new elements to incorporate into my own telling. *The Storyteller's Sourcebook* helps with this search.

But back to our flying turtle tale search. You simply look up "turtle" in the subject index, scan through the keywords in the list of many turtle stories and reach—"flying turtle." Yes! That is the tale. You are referred to *Motif J2357*. So flip back through the book and discover. *J2357 Tortoise speaks and loses his hold on the stick. He is being carried through the air by a bird*. Good grief! Twenty variants are listed! There are versions from Ceylon, China, India, Nicaragua, Russia, Somalia. Oh, this is the one you remember seeing—the one from Haiti! And here is the source—Diane Wolkstein's *The Magic Orange Tree*, page 189. You've found your tale!



Dr. Margaret Read MacDonald is author of over fifty books on folklore and storytelling topics, including *Tell the*

World: Storytelling Across Language Barriers (Libraries Unlimited 2008) and *The Great Smelly, Slobbery Small-Tooth Dog (August House 2007)*.

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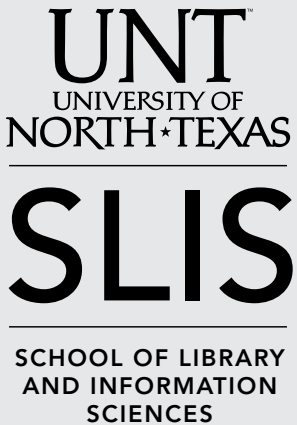
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