



**C**onsider the Source

**C**OLD  
**T**ALES  
**R**E TOLD

Series Two

# Moses: Man of the Mountain

From earliest times, women and men have told stories — around fires, in courts and mead halls, in family homes and sacred settings. Our literature today — even the most “modern” or “innovative” — in some way reflects these early stories. This is not accidental: there is a power in the old tale which lends power to the new one.

This early literature described places and events, people and creatures — both natural and supernatural. It explored, thoughtfully and imaginatively, the world, its origins, its place in a larger universe, and its eventual end. Today, we call these early stories variously history, religion, mythology, legend, or folk and fairy tale. One person’s or era’s history can be another’s mythology; but regardless of factual truth, we continue to tell and retell the “old tales” — perhaps for some other kinds of truths we sense in them.

There are other reasons, too, that stories from mythology and religion along with legend and fairy tale persist in our literature. They are good stories, full of vivid characters and exciting events. They deal with both the natural and the supernatural worlds, with the outer and inner worlds of the human mind, with a timeless world and our place in it. They explore literally many things modern society understands only symbolically, such as gods and monsters, incarnation and metamorphosis. Mortals set off on impossible quests, discover the unknown in the midst of their familiar world, undergo or cause marvelous changes, encounter powerful forces of good and evil. Along the way, they often gain moral, psychological, or spiritual knowledge. Underlying every story is a basic dilemma or essential truth of the human condition, psychological constants that seem to exist in all ages and cultures.

Modern writers, feeling the power of the old tales, may use them openly as the basis for their own work. Some show us familiar figures disguised by modern dress, proving that ancient conflicts and insights are relevant to our own lives. Others retain the old setting and give the tale a new twist by altering incidents, personalities, or points of view. Still others make their commentary by weaving together characters and situations from a number of old tales. Whatever their approach, all of these authors work magic — they create new stories that both alter and preserve the old. The result is sometimes amusing, but always provocative, especially for a reader who knows the original tale.

“Consider the Source” is an exploration, in two related series, of old tales and the modern works in which they have been retold. Series Two presents four novels based on stories from widely differing societies. Each one tells us something about the role of stories in a culture, the power of stories in an individual’s life.

Zora Neale Hurston

“Let my people go” — this Biblical cry for freedom was taken into Black folklore and religion in the early days of the American Black experience. Forcibly introduced to Christianity by their masters, Black slaves quickly grasped the parallels between their own oppression and that of the Jews under Pharaoh. These parallels are drawn in traditional songs and sermons and in political rhetoric up to the present day. In *Moses: Man of the Mountain* Zora Neale Hurston has retold the great Bible story of the liberation of the Hebrews from the land of Egypt. She has also created a parable about the struggles of Black Americans.

Since the mid-1970s Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) has had a growing reputation as a major contributor to American and African American literature. Though she died in obscurity, we are now rediscovering the scope and power of her writing, which included fiction and plays, an autobiography, and studies of Southern Black folklore.

In writing *Moses*, Hurston brought to bear elements from her extraordinarily varied experience. Her Black Southern roots and her skills as a folklorist helped her to create, in her Hebrews who speak black dialect, a convincing world of vivid characters. Her participation in the literary movement called the Harlem Renaissance gave her insight into the processes of ideology and intellectual leadership. All this experience, plus her unflinching sense of humor, enabled her to create, in parts of *Moses*, telling satire of universal human follies and ambitions.

As a folklorist, Hurston was aware of the power of stories. In *Moses*, she shows how the legends that sprang up overnight after each of Moses’ great acts helped to strengthen the Hebrews’ identity as a people. She was also aware of the multitude of legends about Moses that range across Asia and Africa. In these legends, Moses is portrayed as the greatest of magicians, the one who “could talk to God face to face.” He is even identified with the god Damballah, whose symbol is the living rod, the serpent. All of these visions of Moses contribute to the complexity of Hurston’s hero. Her Moses is at once a magician with supernatural powers, a loving and fallible human being, and an inspired political leader whose people finally cry “Free at last!”

Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses: Man of the Mountain*. 1939. \*Hilli.

## Ceremony

by Leslie Marmon Silko

Stories, says author Leslie Marmon Silko, "make our lives comprehensible." In this novel she tells the story of Tayo, a World War II veteran who, like her, is of mixed blood — Laguna Pueblo, Mexican and White. Tayo can find healing for his traumatized mind and body only through listening to the stories of the past, stories which Silko presents as "great and inclusive of everything." Returned to his home on a Laguna reservation in New Mexico, he feels helpless and isolated. He seeks some source of meaning to save him from the fate of the other young Native American veterans who have turned to alcohol and violence. As he begins to embrace traditional American Indian culture, Tayo begins to heal.

In the Laguna Indian myth of creation, worlds are created and destroyed in an evolving process that weeds out evil. On some level, this is the process through which Tayo moves. To complete his journey, Tayo must find a way to transcend the centuries of injustice suffered by native Americans. Gradually, his anger becomes modified by a new understanding of the value of endurance. Betonie, the old medicine man, shares his healing vision with Tayo: "the deeds and papers don't mean anything. It is the people who belong to the mountains."

Tayo's journey toward spiritual health is set within the context of American Indian theology and folklore. His story is interwoven with the old tale of how Hummingbird and Bee undertook a quest to save their people from a killing drought; this drought is related both to Tayo's illness and to the drought afflicting Tayo's tribal lands. Silko also brings into Tayo's world characters from the ancient religion, such as the earth spirit called Spider Woman or Thought Woman and the spirit called Mountain Lion, the Hunter.

"It isn't easy," as Hummingbird and Bee keep finding out. But gradually, with the help of Betonie's stories and rituals, the ancient balance is restored. The interconnected evils are dispelled: Tayo recovers, and the rains return. At the same time, Tayo regains his faith in his native culture and rejoices in its continuity and wholeness.

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*. 1977. \*Penguin.

## Grendel

by John Gardner

Since the first fireside tale was spun, people of all ages have thrilled to stories of the not-quite-human. Werewolves, giants, ogres, demons — all are forms of that monster figure, the beast-man, who stalks through the world's mythology and folklore. Even today, tabloids play on our fascination with creatures like Bigfoot, while science fiction novels and films continue to explore the boundaries of the human.

The monster, as a character, gives great power to a story. By its deviations from our human nature, it heightens the significance of the hero, who becomes the representative of a people or of humankind in general. In addition, the monster often embodies a cosmic force of evil. Physically and morally ugly, the monster is a striking character, but ultimately it has a secondary role. It enters the story as a test of the hero's strength and courage, and its most frequent fate is to be defeated.

This is certainly the case in the Anglo-Saxon tale, *Beowulf*. Written in eighth-century England, this epic poem itself retells an earlier legend set in Scandinavia. It celebrates the feats of the hero, Beowulf, who comes to save the Danish kingdom from the monster Grendel. For twelve years Grendel, described as a descendent of Cain, has invaded the Dane's meadhall and devoured the warriors. Beowulf, of course, succeeds where others have failed and even kills Grendel's mother, who seeks to avenge her son.

In his novel *Grendel*, John Gardner gives this tale an intriguing twist by letting Grendel tell it from the monster's point of view. Gardner's Grendel resembles the hero of many modern novels — he is self-conscious, truth-seeking, alienated, confused, and resentful of his fate. Above all he is lonely, isolated by his ugly form and his inability to communicate with either the dumb world of beasts or the rejecting world of humans.

There is much dark humor in Grendel's philosophizing. He ridicules the heroic ideals of the warriors who seek immortal fame. He sees the bard, or Shaper, as a propagandist, creating instant song and legend around the king's deeds in order to win the people's loyalty. Beowulf, too, strikes him as an image-conscious braggart. Yet Grendel is drawn repeatedly to lurk and listen to the tale-spinning in the meadhall. He is a monster gripped by the power of human stories.

John Gardner, *Grendel*. 1971. \*Ballantine.

## **T**he Life and Loves of a She-Devil

by Fay Weldon

Ruth is the elder stepsister, ugly and ungainly, but liberated from the powerful spell of certain stories. She knows that no prince will ride by, see the beauty under her rough exterior, and carry her off to his castle. Nor will a fairy godmother reward her humility and toil by turning her into a beautiful princess. Discovering her own power, she decides to effect the transformation herself.

The magic word which frees Ruth from her miserable role of scorned wife-mother is "she-devil," screamed at her by her furious husband, Bobbo. After brief consideration, she agrees: "This is exhilarating! If you are a she-devil, the mind clears at once. The spirits rise. There is no shame, no guilt, no dreary striving to be good. There is only, in the end, what you want. And I can take what I want. I am a she-devil!"

Ruth, the princess-to-be, takes as her model Mary Fisher, a writer of popular romance novels who apparently believes in them herself—or tries to. "Mary Fisher is small and pretty and delicately formed, prone to fainting and weeping and sleeping with men while pretending that she doesn't." Mary Fisher even lives in a High Tower by the sea. One of the men she sleeps with is Ruth's husband.

Like the mythical witch she resembles, Ruth is ruthless. She systematically destroys Mary Fisher, Bobbo, and their romantic world, then takes it over herself. She plans and efficiently carries out a series of metamorphoses, each under a different, ironically appropriate name. Lacking a magic wand, she painfully completes her transformation at a clinic where "Pygmalion" surgeons do her bidding. The result is a creature as lovely as a fairy tale princess. But inside lurks a she-devil who wants "to be loved and not love in return."

In this brilliant satire of our culture's romantic mythology, Fay Weldon draws on sources as various as "Cinderella," *Frankenstein*, Harlequin Romances, and the Greek tale of Jason and Medea. With wicked humor, she exposes the fairy tale delusions of the people Ruth manipulates on the way to her happy ending. The result is a fast-moving, hilarious novel which will appeal to anyone, male or female, who has ever wanted revenge on society's unreal and unfair romantic expectations.

Fay Weldon, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. 1983, \*Ballantine.

FOR FURTHER READING

**Moses: Man of the Mountain**

- The Books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, *The Holy Bible* (numerous editions).  
*Moses*, Sholem Asch. 1951, Putnam (out of print).  
*Man of Nazareth*, Anthony Burgess. 1979, McGraw (out of print).  
*Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Zora Neale Hurston. 1934, Lippincott (out of print).  
*Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston. 1935, \*Indiana U.  
*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston. 1937, U. of Illinois.  
*J.B.*, Archibald MacLeish, 1958, \*Houghton Mifflin.  
*Joseph and His Brothers*, Thomas Mann. 1948, Knopf.  
*Tarbaby*, Toni Morrison. 1981, Knopf.  
*The Slave*, Isaac Bashevis Singer. 1978, \*Avon.  
*Damballah*, John Edgar Wideman. 1981, \*Random.

**Ceremony**

- The Indians' Book*, ed. Natalie Curtis. 1968, \*Dover.  
*American Indian Myths and Legends*, ed. Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz. 1984, Pantheon.  
*Raindance People*, Richard Erdoes. 1976, Knopf.  
*Love Medicine*, Louise Erdrich. 1984, \*Bantam.  
*Tracks*, Louise Erdrich. 1988, H. Holt.  
*Winterkill*, Craig Lesley. 1984, \*Dell.  
*The Way to Rainy Mountain*, N. Scott Momaday. 1969, \*U. of NM.  
*Storyteller*, Leslie Marmon Silko. 1981, \*Seaver.  
*Changing Woman and Her Sisters*, Sheila Moon. 1984, \*Guild for Psychological Studies.  
*The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen. 1986, \*Beacon Press.

**Grendel**

- Beowulf: The Donaldson Translation, Background and Sources, Criticism*, ed. Joseph E. Tuso. 1975, \*Norton.  
*Reading Beowulf*, J.D.A. Ogilvy and Donald C. Baker. 1983, U. of Oklahoma.  
 "Beauty and the Beast," in *The Classic Fairy Tales*, Iona and Peter Opie. 1974, \*Oxford U.  
 "The Animal Groom Cycle of Fairy Tales," in *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim. 1976, \*Random.  
*Mrs. Caliban*, Rachel Ingalls. 1983, \*Dell.  
*It*, Stephen King. 1986, \*NAL.  
*Perelandra*, C.S. Lewis. 1944, \*Macmillan.  
*The Dunwich Horror and Others*, H.P. Lovecraft. 1963, Arkham.

- The Tempest*, William Shakespeare. 1612, \*NAL/Signet.  
*Frankenstein*, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. 1818, \*Bantam.  
*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Robert Louis Stevenson. 1886, \*Penguin.  
*Nightwalker*, Thomas Tessier. 1980, Atheneum (out of print).

**The Life and Loves of a She-Devil**

- "The Ugly Duckling," in *Andersen's Fairy Tales*, Hans Christian Andersen. 1845, \*NAL.  
 "Cinderella," and others in *The Classic Fairy Tales*, Iona and Peter Opie. 1974, \*Oxford U.  
 "Cinderella," in *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim. 1976, \*Random.  
*Beginning With O*, Olga Broumas. 1977, \*Yale U.  
*The Bloody Chamber*, Angela Carter. 1979, \*Penguin.  
*Medea*, in *Medea and Other Plays*. Euripides. 431 B.C., tr. Philip Vellacott, \*Penguin.  
*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Pierre-Ambrose de Laclous. 1782, tr. P.W. Stone, \*Penguin.  
*Paradise Lost*, in *Paradise Lost and Other Poems*, John Milton. 1667, \*NAL.  
 "Two Incidents of Venus' Anger" and "The Story of Pygmalion," in *Metamorphoses*, Ovid. 1st c. A.D., tr. Rolfe Humphries, \*Indiana U.  
*Transformations*, Anne Sexton. 1971, Houghton Mifflin.  
*Pygmalion*, George Bernard Shaw. 1913, \*S&S.  
*Frankenstein*, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. 1818, \*Bantam.

**Miscellaneous**

- The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell. 1988, \*Doubleday (highly recommended).  
*The Arrow of God*, Chinua Achebe. 1964, \*Doubleday.  
*Watership Down*, Richard Adams. 1972, Macmillan.  
*Eurydice*, in *Five Plays*, Jean Anouilh. 1941, Hill and Wang (out of print).  
*Mulata*, Miguel Angel Asturias. 1967, \*Avon.  
*The Last Unicorn*, Peter Beagle. 1968, \*Ballantine.  
*Arthur Rex*, Thomas Berger. 1978, \*Dell.  
*Something Wicked This Way Comes*, Ray Bradbury. 1962, \*Bantam.  
*The Mists of Avalon*, Marion Zimmer Bradley. 1982, \*Ballantine.  
*Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte. 1847, \*NAL.  
*The Songlines*, Bruce Chatwin. 1987, \*Penguin.  
*Helen in Egypt*, Hilda Doolittle. 1961, \*New Directions.

*Cinderella: A Folklore Casebook*. Alan Dundes. 1971, U. of Wisconsin.  
*A Fable*, William Faulkner. 1954, \*Random.  
*The Magus*, John Fowles. rev. ed. 1977, \*Dell.  
*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. 1967, \*Avon.  
*The Princess Bride*, William Goldman. 1973, Harcourt.  
*God Knows*, Joseph Heller. 1984, \*Dell.  
*Siddhartha*, Hermann Hesse. 1951, \*Bantam.  
*The Medusa Frequency*, Russell Hoban. 1987, Atlantic Monthly.  
*Binstead's Safari*, Rachel Ingalls. 1988, \*S&S.  
*Ulysses*, James Joyce. 1922, \*Random.  
*The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston. 1976, \*Random/Vintage.  
*The Plumed Serpent*, D.H. Lawrence. 1926, \*Random.  
*Til We Have Faces*, C.S. Lewis. 1957, Harcourt (out of print).  
*Beauty*, Robin McKinley. 1987, \*Pocket.  
*Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Norman Mailer. 1984, \*Ballantine.  
*Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison. 1977, \*NAL.  
*The Time of Angels*, Iris Murdoch. 1966, \*Penguin.  
*The Unicorn*, Iris Murdoch. 1963, \*Penguin.  
*Mourning Becomes Electra*, in *Three Plays*, Eugene O'Neill. 1931, \*Random.  
*One Touch of Venus*, S.J. Perelman with Ogden Nash. 1944, Little Brown (out of print).  
*The King Must Die*, Mary Renault. 1958, \*Random.  
*Man and Superman*, George Bernard Shaw. 1903, \*Penguin.  
*Gimpel the Fool*, Isaac Bashevis Singer. 1955, \*Fawcett.  
*The Last Enchantment*, Mary Stewart. 1979, \*Fawcett.  
*Fables for Our Time*, James Thurber. 1940, Har-Row.  
*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Mark Twain. 1889, \*NAL.  
*The Centaur*, John Updike. 1963, Knopf.  
*The Color Purple*, Alice Walker. 1982, \*WSP.  
*The Golden Apples*, Eudora Welty. 1949, \*HarBrace.  
*The Robber Bridegroom*, Eudora Welty. 1942, \*HarBrace.  
*Damballah*, John Edgar Wideman. 1981, \*Random.  
*Don't Bet on the Prince*, Jack Zipes. 1987, \*Routledge, Chapman, and Hall.

Original publication date is listed for all titles. An asterisk (\*) indicates an in-print paperback edition.

"Consider the Source: Old Tales Retold," is a humanities-based library reading and discussion program with two alternate series.

#### Series One

*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, by Mark Twain  
*Pygmalion*, by George Bernard Shaw  
*Transformations*, by Anne Sexton  
*Mrs. Caliban*, by Rachel Ingalls

#### Series Two

*Moses: Man of the Mountain*, by Zora Neale Hurston  
*Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko  
*Grendel*, by John Gardner  
*The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, by Fay Weldon.

This brochure was written by Project Director Sarah Getty and Jennifer Lee, with the assistance of Leah Glasser and Barbara Smith.

"Consider the Source: Old Tales Retold" is part of "Sharing Humanities Programs in New England Libraries," a project sponsored by the New England Foundation for the Humanities and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and New England Telephone.

The development, design, and production of this material were made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and by additional funding from New England Telephone.

copyright © 1988 New England Foundation for the Humanities  
 design by Janet Theurer