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You Must Be Kidding:

Tall Tales are a Tall Order

By Caren Neile, Ph.D., ATMS

How to be the biggest liar this side of Mars.

◀ Storyteller Bill Lepp in action at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee.

I was late submitting this article because the icemaker in my freezer was on the blink. It just wouldn't stop pouring out ice. Pretty soon the house was so cold that our parakeet froze solid in flight. And when I tried to boil water on the stove, the bubbles froze in the pot.

A plausible excuse for a late submission? Hardly. But it does have the makings of a good tall tale. With the Toastmasters Tall Tale Contest just around the corner and plenty of other contests and storytelling opportunities nationwide, this is a good time to brush up on this quintessentially American art form.

According to Carolyn S. Brown in *The Tall Tale in American Folklore and Literature*, a tall tale is "a fictional story which is told in the form of personal narrative or anecdotes,

which challenges the listener's credulity with comic outlandishness, and which performs different social functions depending on whether it is heard as true or as fictional." In other words, because the tall tale is presented as a spontaneous reminiscence that happened either to the narrator or to an acquaintance – with true-life, ordinary details that build up almost imperceptibly to something outrageous – even listeners who hear it as fiction often play along and act as though they believe it to be true.

Perhaps it's that semblance of truth that has made the tall tale, or whopper, so successful throughout American history. From the country's inception, Americans have crowed about how the U.S. and its inhabitants, whether an anonymous farmer or the legendary Pecos Bill, were larger, stronger, and wilder than life. Both ordinary pioneers and celebrities from 19th-century author Mark Twain to current-day radio personality Garrison Keillor have celebrated the nation's grandness – and the urge to tame it – with this inimitable type of story.

Not everything was rosy in the history of tall tales. For one thing, they tended to give short shrift to minorities, women and animals. And they were not what you'd call eco-friendly. But the 18th and 19th centuries were different times, and today, most examples of the genre are as inclusive and respectful as they are fun. Tall tales are regularly shared throughout the United States at what are known as liars' contests. Some of the most well-known of these are in West Virginia, Nebraska, Florida, Indiana, California – and of course Texas, which, like a certain well-known burger chain, could be called the Home of the Whopper.

“The secret to a good tall tale is exaggeration.”

Perhaps the most common example of a tall tale is heard almost every day at docks and fishing holes throughout the land. My favorite traditional “fish tale” concerns the storyteller's having become so attached to a prize catch that she taught it to walk, only to have it subsequently drown when she gave it swimming lessons!

In the rules for the Toastmasters Tall Tale Contest, one of the event's primary goals is listed as “to provide participants with the opportunity to create an original, highly improbable, humorous tale.” Before you throw your hat in the ring, here are a few suggestions to bear in mind:

First and foremost, the tall tale must be a story, that is, a sequence of related events with a beginning, middle and end, characters and action. It can't just be a shopping list of absurd details. That said, it doesn't have to follow a particular structure. It can be based on traditional tales you've heard; on actual, if unusual events; or on your own imagination.

The secret to a good tall tale is exaggeration. The most common types of exaggeration include size, abilities such as intelligence or strength, or the aggressiveness of animals or weather. But exaggeration isn't all that's required. The teller should also compare things, says Brown, in a concrete and comical way. That includes making animals seem human, as in the fish tale above.

Here's an excerpt from a tall tale called “Mississippi Mosquitoes,” retold by S.E. Schlosser, on americanfolklore.net:

A visitor to Mississippi decided to take a walk along the river in the cool of the evening. His host warned him that the mosquitoes in the area had been acting up lately, tormenting the alligators until they moved down the river. But the visitor just laughed....

As he promenaded beside the flowing Mississippi, he heard the whirling sound of a tornado. Looking up, he saw two mosquitoes descending upon him. They lifted him straight up in the air and carried him out over the river....

You'll notice that the mosquitoes are compared to a tornado, and the way they carry off their victim likens them to vultures – big ones at that!

And now, a word about performance. While it helps to be a comic actor, the best tall tale tellers use a deadpan style that helps to lend an air of believability to even the craziest story. It's okay to laugh at the end of the tale to assure your audience you're not losing your mind, but you may also choose to sum up by insisting that every word you said is true, or by inviting listeners to check out the evidence.

Tall tales should come across as stories of the common people, not highbrow literary creations. It's helpful to speak in short, simple sentences, with pauses, vocal variety, variations of rhythm and timing, and all your other good speaking skills. Make your images sharp and easy to imagine. Use comic understatement. That is, when you say something absurd, don't overplay it; let the details speak for themselves. Overall, remember, your goal is not to inform, inspire or touch, but to amuse.

Bil Lepp: The Liars' Liar

You don't need to take my word for any of this. If you want to learn the truth about lying, there's no better expert than Bil Lepp, a nationally renowned performer and five-time champion of the West Virginia's Liars' Contest. Lepp is an award-winning storyteller, author, and recording artist, whose release "*The Teacher in the Patriotic Bathing Suit*," recently received the coveted Parent's Choice Award. Says Bil, "Everywhere I slept, I've lied."

I first heard Bil perform several years back at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee. He told a tale called "Buck Ain't No Ordinary Dog" from his CD of the same title. The story, which can also be found in his book *The Monster Stick and Other Appalachian Tall-Tales*, features an image I will never forget: someone hanging from a speeding train by his frozen tongue.

I recently asked Bil for his advice about creating a tall tale.

"My best advice is to start with something true," he said. "Most of my tales are based on things that have happened to me, or someone I know. I start with the truth, and stay true, or plausible, as long as I can, to lure the audience in."

"As far as presentation goes, I stick with Mark Twain's advice: You have to tell the story like you believe every word, and you don't get why the audience is laughing. I try very hard to keep a straight face on stage. I also let the story do the work. I have some gestures and movements when I tell, but I try and keep my feet in one place, to avoid 'acting' out the story."

The most common pitfall to creating tall tales, according to Lepp, is too much jargon.

"I've seen people write tales about sailing or flying that might be very good," he explained, "but are so full of technical language that Popeye and Chuck Yeager would leave scratching their heads. Write what you know, but make sure it's also something somebody else knows. That's why I stick to dogs, trains, and kids as subjects. Everybody knows about those things."

Finally, Bil's typical set-up for a tall tale is a simple, believable situation or statement, such as "I have a dog."

"Everybody can understand that; everybody knows what a dog is," he said. "There are no dog agnostics. Then I'll do a few jokes, sort of like one-liners, to let the audience know that this is supposed to be fun. After that, I set the stage for what is going to happen in the tale. Then I start my gradual exaggeration, building slowly toward where the story takes off completely from the world of possibility."

Once the story takes off, Lepp explains, he can go anywhere with it, as long as he stays true to the context he's established. The end of the tale usually ties back into the beginning of the story in some manner. To find out more about Bil, visit www.buck-dog.com.

Before creating your own tale, you may want to familiarize yourself with collections of tall tales online or in libraries until you're fairly comfortable with the form. Most of all, have fun, both during the writing and the telling of your story. As with most other storytelling and speaking, don't try to memorize more than your opening and closing lines. Let the images run through your head like a movie, and describe them as you see them.

The last time I did that, the audience laughed so loud the building collapsed around our ears. They were still laughing as we climbed out of the rubble. As a matter of fact, I think I hear them laughing now.

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directs the South Florida Storytelling Project at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. An ATMS and a CL in West Boca Toastmasters, she is 10 feet tall and wins first, second and third place in every contest she enters. She can be reached at cneile@fau.edu. Really.
