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2017

http://hdl.handle.net/10539/23002

Treffry-Goatley, Lisa Anne (2017) A critical literacy and narrative analysis of African Storybook folktales for early reading, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/23002>

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A critical literacy and contextualised narrative analysis of African Storybook folktales for early reading.

Abstract

This study critically analyses a set of folktales from the African Storybook website, which is an open licence digital publishing platform supporting early reading in Africa (www.africanstorybook.org). The selected folktales were mostly written by educators and librarians working in the African Storybook project pilot sites. The folktales were illustrated and published as indigenous African language and English storybooks during 2014 to 2015.

The analysis is centrally concerned with the settings in which the folktales take place (with a distinction made between space, place and time), and the age and gender associated with central characters. The analytical tools used and the perspectives applied are drawn predominantly from post-colonial studies, African feminism, critical literacy, broad folktale scholarship, and theory from local – as opposed to global – childhoods.

The analysis is interested in the conventions of the folktale genre, as it is constructed in the narratives by the writers. The three central findings with regards to the settings of folktales are as follows: (i) 90% of the folktales are set in rural environments in or near villages or small settlements. The somewhat idealised villages and settlements appear to have been relatively untouched by modern communications and infrastructure, and represent a "nostalgic, imagined past". (ii) The study found that 75% of the folktales are set in the remote past, indexical of the folktale genre's oral roots. (iii) Supernatural characters, objects and events occur in nearly 75% of the folktales. This suggests a possible interpretive space of intersecting temporalities and dimensions of existence, as well as possibilities for imaginative problem-solving. In addition, it raises challenging questions about the limits of human agency.

The study also found that the ASb folktales, perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly for a genre that tends to employ archetypes and stereotypes, seemingly offer no characterisation outside of heteronormative family roles. But despite the heteronormativity and narrowly-defined family roles, especially for women characters, the folktales also present other positions for female gendered characters, and by extension for girl child readers – courageous, interesting, clever and unconventional female characters are in no shortage in these narrative populations.

The findings suggest that the ASb folktales provide a range of identity positions for both girls and boys in African contexts, and my study reflects on how educators might navigate this complex territory. In particular, the findings point to how teachers and other adult caregivers might balance the moral and cultural lessons in folktales with the need for children to imagine and construct different worlds and positions for themselves.