



American Short & Tall Tales

Study Guide



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This study guide was compiled by Jennifer Yellin with assistance from other members of the Wild Swan Theater staff.

The Play

American Short and Tall Tales is a compilation of three stories: "Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind Crockett Meets Mike Fink, Snappin' Turkle," "Tía Misería," and "Why Lapin's Ears Are Long." In addition to the stories, popular 19th century songs including "Oh, Susanna," "Turkey in the Straw," and "My Aunt Came Back" will be interspersed throughout the play. The songs will be accompanied by guitar, fiddle, banjo, and mandolin which were popular during the 19th century as well.

Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind Crockett Meets

Mike Fink, Snappin' Turkle

Although a classic tall tale, this story, is a little unlike most tall tales as the main character is a woman.

Sally Ann is the wife of Davy Crockett, the famous tall tale hero. Unlike her husband, however, Sally Ann is willing to fight the boasting, lying bad Mike Fink. She outsmarts him, out-wits him, and out-frightens him, and wins her husband a dozen wildcats, not to mention loosening all the teeth in Mike Fink's mouth.

Tía Misería

This story is about an old Hispanic woman. The tales mixes the Spanish and English languages to create an experience that reflects American traditions while being true to its Spanish roots.

Tía Misería lives alone with her chickens and her loved pear tree. However, the boys in the village taunt her and eat her delicious pears. One day a magician comes to Tía's house and grants her one wish. Tía is granted the power to keep anyone who climbs up the tree from getting down until she says some special words. The boys get caught in the tree and are finally freed once they promise never again to taunt her nor eat her pears. A short while later Death comes to her door. Tía tricks Death into climbing her pear tree, and then refuses to let him come down, until he promises never to come back.

Why Lapin's Ears Are Long

This exciting adventure story takes place in the bayous of Louisiana. In the authentic Louisiana tradition, the French language is blended with English.

From the Introduction to the story written by Sharon Arms Doucet:

The trickster Lapin was born long ago in western Africa, probably among the Wolof tribe in Senegal and Gambia. In the 1700s and 1800s, he was captured along with his fellow tribesmen and brought to Louisiana in the holds of slave ships. There his stories were translated into French and mingled with elements of European folktales.

Compere Lapin liked his Louisiana home, where he practised his tricks among both the Creoles, or French-speaking Blacks, and the Cajuns, descendants of the French Acadians who had been exiled by the British from their Canadian homeland. Later, he hopped off other slave ships along the English-speaking eastern coast of the United States, where he was made famous by Joel Chandler Harris as "Br'er Rabbit."

Compere Lapin is indebted to the folklorists who collected his stories in various regions of south Louisiana while they were still ripe for the picking. These include Alcee Fortier, who published his first tales in 1888, and such twentieth-century collectors as Calvin Claudel, Corinne Saucier, Elizabeth Brandon, and Barry Ancelet.

While the storyteller's art has embellished and embroidered the adaptations presented here, the stories remain true to the spirit of the early tales. Lapin wouldn't have it any other way.

Lapin, a rabbit, dreaming to be as large as a grizzly, seeks the help of his friend, Madame Tortue, a turtle with the ability to cast magic spells. This tale recounts Lapin's clever and sly tactics to gather the ingredients needed to make him larger: the whisker of a wildcat (Madame La Chatte), the egg of an alligator (Madame Alligator), and a tooth of the grizzly bear (Compère Grizzly). Despite having all the magic ingredients and saying the magic words, Madame Tortue is unable to make Lapin as large as a grizzly - but the ensuing result is just as surprising and clever as the rest of this tale.

About Wild Swan Theater

MISSION STATEMENT:

Wild Swan Theater is dedicated to producing professional children's theater of the highest artistic quality and to making that theater accessible to low income, minority and disabled children through low ticket prices and innovative outreach programs.

HISTORY AND ACTIVITIES:

Wild Swan Theater was founded in 1980. Since its inception, the company of professional, adult actors, dancers, musicians, visual artists, and American Sign Language interpreters has performed for hundreds of thousands of children. As well as many public performances in its home base of Ann Arbor, the company tours regularly to theaters, museums and public libraries as well as offering residencies and workshops at schools and hospitals serving disabled children statewide. This year the company will give 180 performances for an audience of over 50,000 children and their families.

Wild Swan's performance style, which incorporates storytelling and live action with puppets, masks, music and dance, has received critical acclaim as well as an enthusiastic following. The Detroit News has praised the work as "professional children's theater at its very best," and the Flint Museum of Art has described it as "superb theater that enhances life and its joys." Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village has called Wild Swan "one of the finest theaters for families in the nation."

Wild Swan has pioneered a number of audience accessibility measures for disabled individuals that are models in the state and have earned the praise of educators and health specialists across the country. All productions are performed in American Sign Language as well as spoken English with the signing completely integrated into the productions. Thus deaf children and adults not only have complete access to the productions but hearing children are exposed to this beautiful and poetic language. A program for blind individuals includes pre-performance backstage "touch tours". Participants have the opportunity to feel specially constructed props and masks, explore the set, and meet actors and hear the voices their characters will use. Audio-description, a simultaneous description of staging, lights, and costumes, transmitted electronically to participating audience members during pauses in the dialogue, permits audience members who are blind or visually impaired to have access to all the visual elements of the production. As a leader of disabled access in the state, Wild Swan has been a recipient of the Governor's Service Award in 1998 in the Arts in Service category and a grant recipient of Very Special Arts/Michigan for ten years.

Brief History of the Tall Tale

Americans are known throughout the world for their 'tall tales.' Although tall tales can be found in other cultures and countries throughout the world in forms of lying contests, 'yarn-spinning,' and boasting contests, the tall tale is primarily an American tradition.

Tall tales, in America, began during the exploration period, when explorers would write home to Europe exaggerated accounts of the land and people in the Americas. However, tall tales became most prevalent and grew in popularity during colonial times, when contests and story-telling sessions became common activities. In some contests, people would tell stories and the best story-teller would win. In other contests, two people would help one another, adding details to the tale. Additionally, tall tales came in the form of stories swapped over the camp fire, in saloons, and the like.

At one point, people decided to write down these tall tales. One such person is Mark Twain, who is famous for his tall tales (Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn). Tall tales were often written much the same way they were told, accents and all.

What is a Tall Tale?

There are many definitions of the tall tale (see Brown, Carolyn):

"An account of the adventures of a larger-than-life hero"

"A comic fiction disguised as fact, deliberately exaggerated to the limits of credibility or beyond"

"A humorous first person narrative exaggerated to outlandish proportions"

"An interaction between teller and audience - a game played at the hazy border between the credible and the incredible, a challenge and an entertainment at the same time"

Tall tales often function as games, to entertain and amuse the audience, and as tests of wit and knowledge. Most importantly, tall tales are fun, whether you are the author or listening to one being told!!

Some very famous characters from tall tales are: Davy Crockett, Mike Fink, and Paul Bunyon. Females seldom appear in tall tales, much less as heroes of one. Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind Crockett is a popular and exciting exception to this generality, however.

Spanish Influences

Although Spanish settlers did not have a large impact on the city of New Orleans while they occupied it, they did play a large part of creating a culture in other parts of the current United States.

Spanish Exploration

During the 1500s the Spanish explored many parts of North America, and often times were the first Europeans to explore certain geographic areas: the Grand Canyon and the southern part of North America (including present-day Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, New Mexico, Texas). The Spanish settlers were also the first Europeans to: create the first permanent settlement in North America (1526, by Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón); 'discover' the source of the Mississippi River (1539-1541, Hernando de Soto), and set foot on the Pacific coast (1542-1543). The Spanish also settled throughout South America.

Tug of War

Many different geographic regions were 'controlled' by various European countries at different times during North America's history. Here is a brief account:

1762: Louisiana, originally a French territory, was given to Spain to prevent it from falling into the hands of the British

1766: The territories of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and the northern part of Mexico were united by the Spanish under the name *Las Provincias Internas*.

1777-1781: The Spanish sent the American colonists money and arms in their struggle for independence against the British.

1783: Spanish regained control of Eastern Florida from the British, who had taken it over 20 years previously.

1803: The French regained control of Louisiana.

1804: Western Florida was annexed, by force, by the United States

1819-1821: The rest of Spain's territories in Florida become part of the US.

1821: Texas became part of Mexico

1835: Texas proclaimed its independence from Mexico

1846: California joined the United States

1848: Mexico recognized Texas as part of the United States while New Mexico and Alta California proclaimed their independence from Mexico and joined the United States

1853: The United States bought southern Arizona and New Mexican territories from Mexico

1898: Spain granted independence to Cuba. Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines were sold to the United States by Spain.

Spanish Influences

We have the Spanish to thank for introducing various foods and animals to the American continents. For example, without the Spanish, we wouldn't have horses. In addition, the Spanish brought various new types of pigs, cattle, poultry, rabbits, sugar cane, wheat, oats, barley, and rye from Europe. The Spanish language has also had a large influence on today's society and culture. For example, the word Montana comes from the Spanish word *montaña*, meaning mountain. Many other words also have Spanish origins: mesa (literally meaning table), stampede (from the word *estampida*), lasso, to vamoose (from the word *vamos*, meaning let's go), rodeo, and many others.

Throughout the southwestern regions of the United States, as well as in parts of Florida, people continue to speak Spanish. Spanish influence is also strong in South America and Mexico. However, the Spanish culture blended with Native American cultures, creating a culture unique to these regions. Although they all speak Spanish, the accents are very different (much in the same way as accents are different between the United States and England).

Spanish

In "Tía Misería", Tía uses many Spanish words. Here are some of them:

Tía Misería: Aunt Misery	jardín: garden
pollos: chickens	peras: pears
la noche: the night	por favor: please
frijoles: beans	arroz: rice
un deseo: a wish	plata: silver
oro: gold	muchachos: boys
sí: yes	la muerte: death

Here are some Spanish words that you didn't hear in the play:

gato: cat	perro: dog
escuela: school	comida: food
una muchacha: a girl	hola: hello
muchas gracias: thank you very much	hasta luego: until later
adíos: good bye	qué pasa: what's up?
nada: nothing	tengo hambre: I'm hungry
amigo/amiga: friend (male)/friend (female)	

Animal Encounters

In "Why Lapin's Ears Are Long", we meet many different types of animals.

Madame Tortue

Madame Tortue could be either a snapping turtle or an alligator snapping turtle. Like all turtles, both species are toothless, but their very powerful and large jaws are what give them the name 'snapping turtles.' Both the snapping turtle and the alligator snapping turtle are fresh-water turtles and both have long tails. The alligator snapping turtle is the largest fresh-water turtle, weighing up to 200 pounds. This species also has a strongly hooked beak and three rows of "knobby ridges," which look like spikes, on the top of its brown or gray shell (the carapace). It lives in lakes and deep rivers. The snapping turtle's carapace is brown and is often covered in algae or mud. It rarely leaves the quiet, mud-bottomed waters where it lives, except when the females lay their eggs.

Madame La Chatte

Madame La Chatte is probably a bobcat, the most common wild feline in North America. The bobcat lives pretty much everywhere in the United States and has adapted well to the presence of humans. It is a carnivore - it eats most other animals, even though rabbits and hares are known to be one of its favorite meals. The bobcat has a short tail and the color of its fur depends on where it lives (it is lighter in more open areas), and it has a spotted belly.

Madame Alligator

Madame Alligator is an American alligator, found in the southeastern United States. It is the largest reptile in North America and its habitat includes swamps, rivers, and bayous. The American alligator has a rounded, broad snout and the color of its skin depends on its age (older adults are gray-black and younger alligators are black with yellow crossbands). Female alligators can lay anywhere between 20 and 60 eggs, staying with them until they hatch (10 weeks later) and up to one year later.

Compère Grizzly

Although this story is very specific to mention that Compère Grizzly is a grizzly bear, grizzly bears are found only in Western Canada and Alaska. Black bears, although not found in Louisiana, are located in a few specific areas in the United States. The black bear often lives in caves, especially in the fall and winter. Its fur can range in color from light brown to black. The black bear has a brown snout and when standing on its hind legs it is around 5 feet tall. It lives in forests, swamps and mountains and will eat anything, from plants to animals to garbage.

The grizzly bear, on the other hand, stands between 6 and 7 feet tall, and its fur ranges from yellow to dark brown and even to black. The grizzly bear's fur is white-tipped, which gives it the name grizzly bear. Unlike the black bear, the grizzly bear has a hump on its back.

Lapin

Lapin, more than likely, is a black-tailed jackrabbit. Jackrabbits aren't even rabbits - they are actually hares. The hare is a close cousin to the rabbit. The hare is larger than the rabbit, has larger ears, and longer, stronger legs. The hare, as opposed to the scampering and running of the rabbit, tends to leap and hop. The black-tailed jackrabbit, in comparison to other hares, is known

for its very long, black-tipped ears, large hind feet and dark streaked tail. The black-tailed jackrabbit tends to live in open areas, like grasslands and deserts. Like most rabbits and hares, the jackrabbit rests in the daytime and feeds during the night.

*Why **do** jackrabbits and rabbits have such long ears?*

Hares and rabbits have many predators, including owls, coyotes (especially coyotes), wolves, and man. But hares and rabbits are equipped with survival 'gear': their powerful legs, their eyes, and their ears. The black-tailed jackrabbit can run up to 45 miles an hour and has been known to leap across spaces as large as 20 feet! Both hares and rabbits have almost a complete circle of vision (they don't have any 'blind spots' the way we do), which allows them to see in almost all directions. Hearing even the smallest of noises is a well-known characteristic of hares and rabbits. Their ears are able to move independently, in different directions. They can pick up the slightest sound, even if the sound is hundreds of feet away. In addition, their ears help in regulating body temperature: when it is hot outside, the ears allow heat to escape, keeping the rabbit or hare cool, while in cold weather blood to the ears is constricted, keeping the heat from escaping. The reason that you wear a hat in the winter-time is because so much heat escapes from our ears!

New Orleans and Mardi Gras

"Why are Lapin's Ears So Long" takes place on a bayou in Louisiana. A bayou is a sluggish, marshy outlet of a river or lake in the southern part of the United States. One very well-known city in Louisiana, near many bayous, is New Orleans.

New Orleans

New Orleans began as a port city, as it is located near the mouth of the Mississippi River. New Orleans was founded in 1718 by the French explorer Jean Baptiste le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville. The French speaking descendants of the original settlers of New Orleans became known as Creoles. Later on, another group of French-speaking people settled in New Orleans from a colony in Arcadia, a colony in Canada. The Arcadian name became shortened to Cajun. Both Creoles and Cajuns still live in New Orleans, and because of the strong French influence, many people still speak French in the city.

For a brief time the Spanish had control of the city, but their influence was not strong. The Louisiana Purchase, in 1803, made New Orleans and the rest of Louisiana part of the United States. New Orleans is famous for its food and music (especially jazz). From its very diverse history, New Orleans has developed two styles of cooking specific to the city: Creole and Cajun. Much of the Creole and Cajun recipes are spicy and have sea-food in them (being only 50 miles west of the Gulf of Mexico, plenty of fresh seafood is available). Two specialties include gumbo and jambalaya.

Mardi Gras

In the story "Why are Lapin's Ears So Long", Madame Tortue is wearing Mardi Gras beads. Mardi Gras is a festival that takes place in New Orleans, Louisiana. Mardi Gras began as a religious festival, but later simply became part of the New Orleans culture. The Mardi Gras carnival is a festival that takes place during the weeks between Christmas and Lent. The parades and parties lead up to Fat Tuesday (also named Mardi Gras), the day before Lent begins. During Mardi Gras, people dress up in all types of costumes and there are many parades and balls, with people coming from all over the world to help celebrate. In fact, because so many tourists crowd into New Orleans many residents take a vacation for those few weeks! During the parades people on the floats throw items, often time beads, to the large, screaming crowds who pack the streets.

Glossary of Words Found in
"Why Are Lapin's Ears So Long":

a la mode (ah lah mode) with ice cream
bayou (BY yoo) wide, slow-moving stream
bijou (bee ZHOO) jewel
canaille (kah NYE) mischievous, tricky, shrewd
chatte, la (shaht, lah) cat, also wildcat
cher, cherie (share, shay REE) dear
cocodrie (coe coe DREE) alligator (from *crocodile*: crocodile)
compere (comb PARE) comrade, brother
eau de (oh duh) water of, as in eau de toilette
gris gris (GREE gree) spell, charm, or incantation
gumbo (GUM boh) a thick soup with a roux base
hors d'oeuvre (or DUV) appetizer
jambalaya (jum buh LYE yuh) a thick mixture of rice, meat & seasonings
jump the broomstick an old Cajun wedding custom
lapin (lah PAN, but leave off the N as in Chopin) rabbit
Ma'amselle (mahm ZEL) short for Mademoiselle, or Miss
Madame (mah DAM) Mrs.
Mardis Gras (mahr dee GRAH) Fat Tuesday, or a day of masked revelry before Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent
mon ami (moh nah MEE) my friend
M'Sieur (ms YOO) short for Monsieur, or Mister
parish county in Louisiana
Rikiri, rikiri, gris, gris, vini (Ree kee ree, REE kee ree, gree gree VEE nee) nonsense words made up by the authopr to sound like a spell
sauce piquante (sahs pee KAHNT) a spicy stew, often made with turtle meat
tortue (tor TUE) turtle
un, deux, trois (un, duh, trwah) one, two, three

Discussion Questions

1. In both "Tía Misería" and "Why Lapin's Ears Are Long", the main characters all speak different languages. Do you know how to speak any other languages? What language(s)? Do any members of your family speak another language? If you could learn to speak another language, what would it be and why?
2. In "Tía Misería", Tía was granted one wish. If the magician came to your house and offered to grant you one wish, what would it be? Why? In "Why Lapin's Ears Are Long", Lapin wanted to be bigger, and would try almost anything to get his wish filled. Is there anything you would like to change about yourself? Has there ever been anything in your life you would do almost anything to get?
3. In the story "Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind Crockett Meets Mike Fink, Snappin' Turkle", Mike Fink liked to brag and fight a lot. Do you know anybody like Mike Fink? What do you think about him or her? Why do you think people brag and fight? Have you ever bragged about or exaggerated something you've done?
4. All three of the stories seem pretty incredible and hard to believe. Why don't we believe that these kinds of stories are true? Do you know any stories that are true but are so incredible people wouldn't believe you if you told them?

Classroom/Home Activities

1. Try writing your own tall tale or riddle and then trade with a friend. Or maybe use your tall tale or riddle and begin a yarn-spinning, riddling contest!
2. Creole and Cajun recipes are popular not only in New Orleans but all throughout the United States. Why don't you try cooking some original New Orleans Gumbo at home with the help of an adult:

What you'll need (for shrimp and okra gumbo):

- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 3 tablespoons flour
- 1 large chopped onion
- 1 cup chopped celery
- 5 or 6 cloves chopped garlic
- 1 cup chopped green pepper
- 1 can tomato sauce
- 1 can tomatoes ("Rotel" tomatoes for a spicier taste)
- 1 pound, fresh slice okra (or 2 boxes frozen sliced okra)
- 2 pounds fresh shrimp
- 2-3 cups water
- salt and pepper to taste
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 tablespoon chopped parsley
- 1 bay leaf

For seafood gumbo, add the following:

- 1 small can crabmeat or 3 fresh gumbo crabs
- 1 jar oysters

What to do:

1. *Slowly* stir the flour into heated oil in a heavy cast iron skillet. Continue to stir until the flour is dark brown. Add the next 4 ingredients; stir until onions are clear.
2. Add tomato sauce. Stir until it gets crumbly or dry. Fry okra in another skillet until it is no longer sticky or stringy. Add tomatoes and fried okra.
3. Cook slowly, adding 2 to 3 cups of water - a little at a time. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Stir in one teaspoon of sugar.
4. Cook for about an hour on a low fire, stirring occasionally to prevent sticking to the bottom of pot; adding water if necessary. Add the shrimp and the bay leaf (*and if desired, the oysters and crabmeat*).
5. Cook another 30 minutes to an hour, adding seasoning to taste.
6. Serve over boiled or steamed rice.

(visit <http://www.neworleansweb.org> for more Cajun and Creole recipes)

3. Try a few different jump-roping tricks and styles. Before you can do tricks, though, here are a few pointers on the basic jump:

- Hold the ends of the rope in both hands with your elbows close to your body and your arms bent.

- Your thumbs should be on top of the handles

- Start with the rope behind your heels and swing it over your head.

- When it comes to your feet, jump just high enough to get over it

- Jump on the balls of your feet, with your feet together and your knees slightly bent

Now you're ready to try this trick:

The Criss-Cross

1. Start with a few basic jumps

2. Bring the rope forward and cross your arms. Make sure to bring your hands all the way across the front of your body, as if you were giving yourself a hug. Your elbows should almost touch.

3. Swing the rope and jump. Then uncross your arms and jump again.

To learn more about jump-roping tricks, or how to jump-rope with some of your friends, the book Red Hot Peppers: The Skookum JumpRope Book of Games, Rhymes, and Fancy Footwork by Bob and Diane Boardman.

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