



# Classics in Short No 138: Tales of Uncle Remus

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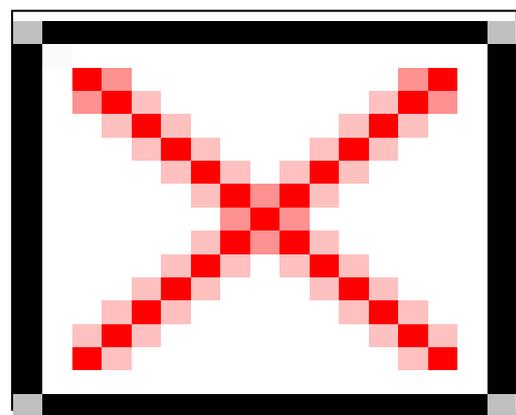
Tales of Uncle Remus

Brian Alderson celebrates a representation of oral folklore transferred into print

*?In dem days de beastesses kyar'd marters jes de same ez fokes?* or so we are told in the tales of Uncle Remus

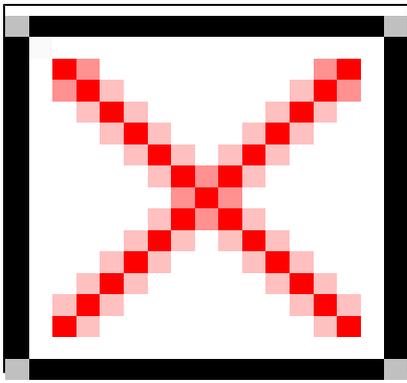
**Mr Bright,**

the radical MP, was ?very much taken with Uncle Remus. When papa showed it to him he used to read it aloud till the tears ran down with laughing?. Thus Beatrix Potter to her journal on the 16 September, 1884. But whether the laughter was provoked by the stories or the mode of storytelling or both is not vouchsafed.



**For sure,**

Mr Bright was not the only one to laugh at this surprising and original work. **Uncle Remus and his Legends of the Old Plantation** had been published in New York at Christmas 1880, dated 1881, and an English edition was published by David Bogue as soon as copy could be shipped across the Atlantic so that by 1884 the country was awash with enthusiasm for the stories. (Copyright being of no account, Bogue's volume, which used the original illustrations by Church and Moser, had been quickly followed by one from the indefatigable Routledge who drew on the rather classier work of A.T Elwes.)



## The legends themselves

had been collected by Joel Chandler Harris, a white journalist working in Atlanta, Georgia, who had mixed fraternally with black communities down there and had been deeply impressed with the stories they told among themselves. He also had a fine ear for the vernacular of the storytellers and he cast his little narratives in the voice of an old slave attached to and valued by a plantation family. Rather than string them along though as if he were a Brother Grimm, Harris set them in a frame with Uncle Remus telling them to a little boy of the family. He creeps down to the old man's cabin after tea rather as the children of the Earl of Derby famously crept down to the servants' quarters to hear the comic verses of the 'dirty landscape painter' Edward Lear.

## Harris was a reliable witness.

The stories he reproduced were mostly entertaining animal fables of the trickster genre which have been assumed to stem from such African or Jamaican sources as those of Anansi, the trickster spider of West Africa. They were acclimatized to the back roads of the Southern scene and many have been found cognate with similar tales independently conceived elsewhere. (There's an echo of *Ali Baba* in *The Awful Fate of Mr Wolf*; *The Moon in the Mill-Pond*, from a later volume, is a version of the English Gotham story; and there's a *Three Little Pigs* with five pigs in it along with the wolf's famous couplet:

*Ef you'll open dedo' en let me in'*

*I'll wom my han's en go home agi'n .*

## The stories number nearly two hundred,

spread through some nine volumes between 1880 and 1955. Most centre on the adventures and antagonisms of a community of animals, especially the Anansi figure of Brer Rabbit whose double dispute with Brer Fox over the matter of the Tar-Baby has achieved a universal popularity all on its own. John Goldthwaite, noted below, finds among them tales based on myth, such as *The Story of the Deluge*, ghost stories and other stories of the supernatural (Brer Rabbit's visit to Mammy-Bammy Big-Money in *Brother Rabbit Submits to a Test* has a strange resemblance to Andersen's little mermaid's desperate interview with the Sea-Witch.) Unexpected in animal tales though are also the twenty or so tales in which people 'Miz Meadows and the gals' - take part: young ladies who happily entertain and converse with the main animal protagonists in their house down the street, the lads behaving just like town-folk. (Goldthwaite argues plausibly that they may be running a whorehouse.)

## There has been some anguish

over the presentation of these stories in their dialect form and for many they may be texts only for professional storytellers, and children may well be unable to cope with even a simple sentence: 'Fine um war you will en w'en you may, good chilluns allers gits tuck good keer on?'. Well, 'war you will en w'en you may?', the Legends must nevertheless be accounted both one of the great books of American literature and a great representation of oral folklore transferred into print. (See contemporary arguments about the writing of Lallans.) An excuse can even be made for the persistent framing of the tales through the little boy's visits to the old storyteller because it helps to authenticate a time

and place for the record. Worthy attempts to 'sanitize' Harris's narrative skills do injury to their historic importance.

## **His reputation**

has suffered over recent decades, not least from the invention of 'identity politics', but a powerful justification of his achievement and its relation to children's literature is given by Goldthwaite in his much neglected study **The Natural History of Make-Believe** (OUP, 1996), separately trailed in two numbers of Nancy Chambers's **Signal** in 1985. By way of compromise however there appeared in 1987 the first of four volumes (down to 1994) in which Julius Lester incorporated the best tales of the extensive canon into books for children illustrated by Jerry Pinkney: **The Tales of Uncle Remus**. He paid tribute to Harris 'his integrity regarding the tales was exemplary and remarkable' and he did not drastically rewrite Harris's texts but abbreviated and converted them into a retellable modern version that retained something of their flavour. It has restored the old man's stories to the story-bag but a true authenticity cannot help being lost. Look at this: 'I was born and raised in the briar patch, Brer Fox! Born and raised in the briar patch'. And he hopped on over the hill and out of sight?. Can such really replace the great original: 'Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox ' bred en bawn in a brier-patch!' en wid dat he skip out des ez lively as a cricket in de embers."

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His latest book **The 100 Best Children's Books**, Galileo Publishing, 978-1903385982, £14.99 hbk, is out now.

Versions of **The Tales of Uncle Remus** are available from Amazon.

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