

A Tell-Tale History

There has always been a job for the storyteller.

On blustery winter evenings when it's too cold to go outside, when dinner has been eaten and all the dishes put away, many North American families can be found gathered in their living rooms. There, a colourful glass box tells stories that average half an hour long, including commercials. Watching television is one modern descendant of a storytelling tradition that probably goes back to the very first human conversation.

Before the invention of the printing press, few stories were written down. In many cultures, professional storytellers earned their livings memorizing and reciting hundreds of stories. If they could find a position in royal courts, their tales provided a comfortable living. The *ollams*, or storytellers of thirteenth-century Celtic societies in northern Europe, were allowed to wear five colours in the court—only one less than royalty wore.

Being able to tell stories on demand required quite a mental library. Irish *shanachies*, who specialized in historical tales, usually drew from a memorized collection of over 150 stories. Tenth-century *skalds* of Norway and Iceland needed more than

their own assortment of stories, which were usually told in poetic form. Their job included relating heroic deeds they witnessed when they joined their lords in battle.

If professional storytellers failed to secure a royal position, they would travel throughout their country or even farther, telling stories for a price. As early as the fourth century, *minstrels*—including jugglers, musicians,

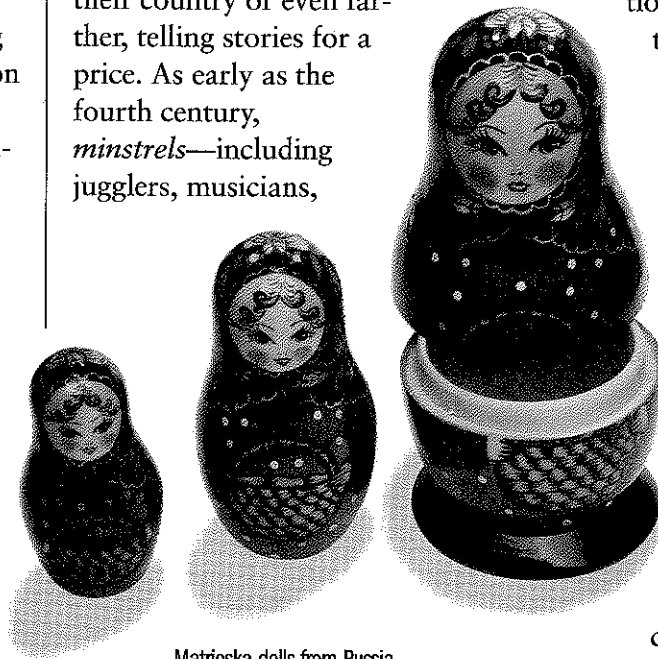
great importance on precise memorization, their stories have been preserved through numerous generations.

Visual aids also accompanied stories. In eastern Europe, nesting dolls, or *Matrioska*, symbolized the different generations men-

tioned in a story. Storytellers in Zaire and Angola carried a knotted rope with various tokens tied into it as a sort of menu. Listeners could choose an object and hear the corresponding story. The Incas of Peru also used a knotted cord, called the *quipu*, which they tied into configurations that would trigger their memories. Inuit storytellers sometimes

drew with a knife in the snow or mud to illustrate their stories, while the Walberi in Australia made patterns in the sand.

Many of these oral traditions continue today in one form or another. As more people gain access to stories told through the media and through books, each culture has to decide whether and how to preserve the traditions of its oral storytellers.



Matrioska dolls from Russia

and acrobats as well as storytellers—travelled all over Europe.

Other storytellers played music to enliven their tales, too, from the *minnesingers* of Germany and the *troubadours* of France to the *griots* of Senegal and Gambia. Some storytellers created their music on the spot while others used traditional tunes. Because many aboriginal cultures place