

African American Folktales

Edited by Thomas A. Green. 2009. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group. 184 pages. ISBN: 978-0-313-36295-8 (hard cover).

Reviewed by [Adam Zolkover](#), Indiana University

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Similar to the other three volumes in Greenwood Press' Stories from the American Mosaic series, Thomas A. Green's *African American Folktales* claims “to provide educators, students, and general readers with examples of a range of traditional African American narrative types” (ix). Black folk narrative, the author writes, has for too long been pinned to the eye-dialect animal tales made so popular by Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus books. And with a selection of fifty narratives culled from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sources, this volume seeks to showcase the subject matter's diversity, purporting to offer examples from the “animal fable to the romantic fairy tale,” originally told in languages as varied as standard colloquial English, “Africanized English Gullah,” and “French Creole” (ix).

African American Folktales is broken down into four sections—Origins; Heroes, Heroines, Villains, and Fools; Society and Conflict; and The Supernatural—each populated with a selection of tales from a variety of genres and geographic locales. Many come from the little-read early issues of *The Journal of American Folklore*, from now-obscure books by anglo- and francophone folklore collectors like Alcée Fortier and Mary A. Owen, from publications of the Bureau of American Ethnology (a branch of the Smithsonian Institution), and most notably from early African American-produced collections like Joseph S. Cotter's *Negro Tales* (New York: Cosmopolitan Press, 1912). Green never strays as far from the animal tale as he suggests in the book's preface, but every section includes an array of legends, John and Old Master stories, humorous anecdotes, and personal experience narratives drawn from the Depression-era WPA life histories of freedmen. And when Green does offer animal tales, they are often, in one sense or another, unexpected. For example, he includes two versions of ATU 175, best known from Harris' *Uncle Remus, His Songs and Sayings* as “The Wonderful Tar Baby Story.” But one comes in the form of a *chante fable*, collected in the 1930s in West Virginia by John Harrington Cox, while the other, collected by Fortier in 1895 and translated from French Creole, features Compair Lapin as the narrative's wily protagonist.

But while Green's diversity of materials is compelling, it is presented in a form that ultimately more than disappoints. A far cry from books in similar series like Richard M. Dorson's now-classic *Folktales of the World* (1963-1979), *African American Folktales* offers almost none of the scholarly accoutrements we might expect even from the most bare-bones of endeavors. It includes no notes, no index of tale types or motifs, and only a scant ten-item “Select Bibliography” that does not even provide a list of the works from which the collected stories are drawn. That data, of course, is included, but it is scattered piecemeal throughout the volume, available only at the end of each individual text.

Moreover, although, like the *Folktales of the World* series, each text in this volume includes a brief headnote, the information presented therein is unfortunately scant, filled with vague gestures toward historical and cultural context and little if any comparative data. Our first introduction to Rabbit, for example, says only that he “assumed overwhelming popularity” as a trickster figure in the American South, displacing African tricksters like “Tortoise, Hyena, and Hare” (25). Likewise, our first introduction to Jack says only that he “shares common traits with Rabbit and the other animal tricksters of African American folklore,” but that Jack Tales “bear the marks of European rather than African influence” (51). Neither headnote is specific about the cultural significance or the distribution of the tales introduced. And inasmuch as each offers any analysis at all, it is of a superficial, moralizing sort that would be of limited use in a middle- or high-school classroom, much less with university undergraduates.

An argument could be made that, in all of these cases, such scholarly “problems” are in fact the result of a book meant for “students,” and especially “general readers” (ix). But even that cannot forgive this volume's most glaring shortcoming—the fact, as Green writes, that “the narratives have been modified from their original forms for the benefit of contemporary readers” (ix). If this disclaimer only meant translation—from French Creole, or Gullah, or even from the eye-dialect that plagues so many early African American collections—modification of the texts might be acceptable. But Green writes that he has in fact edited their substance: he has “eliminated redundancy in some cases” and in others, “substituted” “alternative terminology” for “terms (particularly racially charged terms) that would prove

offensive to contemporary readers” (x). There is, of course, ample precedent for this, most recently in Alan Gribben's expurgated edition of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2011). But as critics of that book have largely agreed, and as folklorists have long asserted, the words of an artist, whether Twain or an unnamed freedman, are sacred. And to censor them simply for the comfort of educators, or to assuage the delicate sensibilities of contemporary readers, borders on disrespect.

In her review of another volume of Stories from the American Mosaic, Lesley Ham speculates that it is not students *per se* who are the audience here, but children, specifically. And yet, as she writes, with small print and no illustrations, this series is less than compelling in that venue as well. As a children's book, *African American Folktales* is far outshone by an array of classic folktale retellings, not the least of which is Virginia Hamilton's award-winning *The People Could Fly* (New York: Knopf, 1985). As a book for scholars and general readers, the book under review is outdone by collections from Roger D. Abrahams, Julius Lester, and many more. The diverse selection of tales in this volume is indeed a compelling feature. But given the shortcomings of *African American Folktales*, students, educators, and scholars alike would be better served elsewhere.