typical middle school student’s Grimm-Andersen-Disney acquaintance with folk literature. If one did turn to Stith Thompson’s Index, one would find the characters and events of Holes generously represented among compiled motifs; for example, unpromising hero or heroine (L100-L199); suitor tests (H310-H359); tasks imposed (H920); witch assigns tasks (H935); task performed with help of old woman (H571); task of carrying over-increasing burden up mountain (H114.2); task contrary to laws of nature (H1020); bride offered as prize (H336); curses (H400-499); old woman helper (H825.3); old woman’s curse (M41.5); curse: failure in all undertakings (M441); magic powers from swallowing magic drink (D1735.3); magic results from bathing (D1788); magic healing water (D1500.118); magic healing river (D1500.118.6); magic healing drink (D1500.117); magic object gives invulnerability (D1944); magic invulnerability (D1945).

Several pieces of Sachar’s story are fairy tale-like in nature, but, most notably, is the account of Stanley’s great-great-grandfather’s quest for the hand of a young woman he thinks he loves. Like so many fairy-tale suitors, Elya Yelnats is an underdog - young and poor, but passionate and pure of heart. Like his many fairy-tale counterparts, he enters a competition to prove his worth to his beloved and her father: Alas, this adventure, which involves a pig, a promise, the aforementioned Madame Zeroni, a task imposed, a magic lullaby, and an enchanted stream where the water runs uphill) ends hastily with a task unfinished, a promise unfulfilled, and a curse heaped on Elya’s head and the heads of his descendants. Students will quickly recognize in this bit of Yelnats family history the unworthy suitor, the competition, the task, the fairy godmother-helper, the magic, and the curse that are familiar elements in fairy tales with which they have been acquainted since childhood such as “The Frog Prince,” “Cinderella,” “The Golden Goose,” “Sleeping Beauty,” and “The Brave Little Tailor.”

Elements that readers will readily associate with fairy tales continue to appear throughout the story, often at critical junctures. Stanley, like Elya before him, proves to be the fairy tale hero who is unfailingly pure of heart despite his humble appearance and underdog history. Recognizable as magic, albeit homely magic, is the onion juice that works as a potion to protect Stanley and Zero from the fatally poisonous stinging of the dreaded yellow-spotted lizard, this tale’s incarnation of a deadly dragon. In fact, a certain magic has seemed attached to Stanley from the earliest pages of Holes. The careful reader notes a peculiar happenstance of his lineage: “Stanley was an only child, as was every other Stanley Yelnats before him” (p. 9). As in “Rumpelstiltskin,” the recognition of a name climaxes the story, this time it being the palindrome Stanley Yelnats. At this point, as in so many fairytales, the true heir is revealed, and Stanley, once the Ugly Duckling but now transformed by his physically rigorous tenure at Camp Green Lake, and with his true mettle finally apparent, redeems his family from its Old World curse and restores its fortune.

While Elya Yelnats’ brush with love puts an Old World fairy tale, albeit one gone awry, at the heart of Holes, the complication of his tale awaits in the New World, specifically the American West, not a place of fairy tales but of legends and tall tales. Accordingly, Sachar moves his story forward by thrusting Elya’s offspring into the path of the legendary Kissin’ Kate Barlow, wronged schoolmarm turned vengeful outlaw. The incident that changes Kate’s life is viciously racist. Because Kate has fallen in love with Sam, a Black man, a sheriff burns down her schoolhouse and Trout, a feckless, spurned suitor, murders her beloved. Kate kills the sheriff and turns to a life of crime, robbing the first Stanley Yelnats, Elya’s son, as he travels West after striking it rich in New York’s stock market. She buries Stanley’s fortune at what will become Camp Green Lake. Twenty years later, Kate dies as an impoverished Trout vainly attempts to make her reveal the whereabouts of Stanley’s trove. Trout’s granddaughter, Green Lake’s sadistic warden, is determined to find those riches, and her search for them drives the plot in which the fourth Stanley Yelnats becomes ensnared.
Kissin' Kate Barlow will easily remind readers of larger-than-life Old West bandits such as Jesse James and Belle Starr. For two decades she was “one of the most feared outlaws in all the West” (p. 115). Her signature gesture was to apply a fresh coat of red lipstick and then kiss the men she had killed. When her end came, she mocked the murderous Trout and died laughing. Kate's story is tinged with the hyperbole of the tall-tale: her spiced peaches, “food for the angels,” (p. 102) were so delicious that no one else in the town even tried to make them; from the day Kate's beloved Sam was murdered, not a drop of rain fell on Green Lake, turning the thriving community into a desert ghost town.

Old World and New World tales having intersected when Kissin' Kate relieved Stanley I of his newfound wealth, they are set on a trajectory to their resolutions when thirteen-year-old Stanley Yelnats arrives at Camp Green Lake and starts digging Holes. The descendants of the principals from Ellya and Kate's stories meet and play key roles in the unfolding plot until Stanley Yelnats IV has not only fulfilled his great-grandfather's promise to Madame Zeroni, but also recovered his great-grandfather's stolen fortune. On the day that happens, the first drop of rain in one hundred ten years falls on Green Lake; good triumphs over evil and, in this one instance, at least, good luck befalls life's lonely. In presentday Texas, the Old World fairy-tale at last finds its happilyeverafter ending.

The last lines of Holes seem emblematic of the entire outlandish, yet satisfying, tale. The story ends with Zero's mother singing the lullaby Madame Zeroni taught Ellya Yelnats long ago in Latvia, crooned first to a pig and then to her. Sung in the Yelnats and Zeroni families across five generations, the song suffered variations, but constant remained the words “If only, if only.” Repeated throughout Holes, the words seem to punctuate the story for good reason, for in it, Louis Sachar has made the highly improbable happen to fulfill good people's longings. He has employed literary forms in which magic and the outrageous are expected so that unlikely events might happen and enjoy reader acceptance. While in real life “if only, if only” most usually remains but a futile wish, in fairy tales, legends, and tall tales, “if only, if only” can become reality. When this happens in Holes, young readers can take heart and consider that, like Stanley and Zero, they too might prevail over imposing adversaries and life's vicissitudes.

Louis Sachar was able to tell his unlikely story because he ingeniously wove the folkloric into the lives of two down-on-their-luck kids. He let folklore secure his story against a realism that often limits and even destroys heroes. The result: a rich tale of loyalty and goodness triumphing over injustice; a finely crafted novel that has found an appreciative adolescent audience and critical acclaim; and yet another testament to folk literature's continuing magic for contemporary writers and readers.

Works Cited


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Folklore is also known as “folk literature,” or “oral traditions.” Folklore depicts the way main characters manage their everyday life events, including conflicts or crises. Simply, folk literature is about individual experiences from a particular society. The study of folk tradition and knowledge is called folkloristics. Although some folklores depict universal truths, unfounded beliefs and superstitions are also basic elements of folklore tradition. Types of Folklore. Following are the major forms of folklore: Definition & Examples. When & How to Use Folklore. Quiz. I. What is Folklore? Folklore refers to the tales people tell – folk stories, fairy tales, “tall tales,” and even urban legends. Folklore is typically passed down by word of mouth, rather than being written in books (although sometimes people write down collections of folklore in order to preserve the stories of a particular community). The key here is that folklore has no author – it just emerges from the culture and is carried forward by constant retelling. Holes : Folklore Redux. Elizabeth G. Mascia. Folk literature is an unfailingly rich source of reading pleasure and literary study in the middle school classroom. In addition to reading individual legends, folk tales, myth, and fairy tales, teachers and students have discovered the value and satisfaction of comparing text variants from several cultures. Middle schoolers invariably relish “fractured” fairy tales and parodies of the classic tales. Norwegian folklore also encompasses the folk, the religious figures, and a great many animals that only a thought for the word count of this article, and a very guilty conscience, has prevented me from writing about. If you want to read the rest, then please take a look at my blog, norwegianfolktales.blogspot.com, where I post all the tales, as I get around to translating them. LOW. 03 Apr 2017. Anthony Antonello: FOIA request for bullet holes at Comet Ping-Pong denied. [YouTube]. HIGH. 01 Apr 2017. Infowars: US police/military involved in pedophile roundups exclusively speak out. [Infowars]. HIGH.