



Book Review

The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory

by Julie Cruikshank

Jane Burt

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Once upon a time there was a woman called Julie Cruikshank who decided to document the stories of three other women. These other women came from a different tribe from her although they lived in the same area. She decided to document their stories because the stories they told were so interesting and sometimes so different to the stories that she was used to hearing at the university. She realised that the stories that came out of the university (and other story creating houses like the media and business) were only one kind of story about the same place (the Yukon) and the same time (the history of the Yukon). She felt that these women's stories were important and that other people in the university should hear them too. She also realised that these stories influenced the way in which the three women saw the world just as the stories she told influenced the way she saw the world. This had far reaching implications for the story that everyone was trying to tell together in the Yukon, and even in the world. A story that used words like democracy and equality and whose focus was to address imbalances of power and unequal access to choice and the natural resources that are used to keep us alive.

She decided to document these stories for reasons that are familiar to similar story documenters in South Africa. In South Africa we also have many different people living in the same area and many, many different stories. Because of our history, which wasn't very nice as some people thought they were better than other people and tried to pretend as if they were not human, lots of very good stories do not have much power or are not listened to in places where powerful decisions are made. So people like Julie Cruikshank are documenting stories for various reasons: to re-capture an alternative history which includes people ('indigenous' or 'first nation' people) that were in the past left out of the history books, to understand how these people women have experienced the tumultuous changes of the last century, to access information in the stories on environmental factors and share these with scientist storytellers and document the stories of a culture that is rapidly being influenced and changed by a globally dominant culture. Julie spent 17 years as a documenter of stories for all the above reasons. In the process of doing this she has learnt that stories are more than just interesting events that could have some important information in them. She has learnt that stories are alive and living in people and in the social space into which they are created. They do not die if they are removed

from this space but they are not as whole as they in the physical and social space in which they were created. This led to Julie re-thinking the role of stories in the social life of the women she had grown to know.

Julie realised that stories are stories because of other stories. When she started documenting the three women's life stories, the women kept sidetracking and telling her stories of cultural and cosmological significance. She realised that this was an important part of the women telling her their life stories. She needed to understand the women's worldview as it existed in these stories before she would be able to understand the women's personal life stories.

The story is not a stable entity but a living aspect of the storyteller and the audience that listen to the tale. Unless we pay attention to why a particular story is selected or told we will understand very little of its meaning. The art of a storyteller is not only in remembering the story but knowing how to use it appropriately. The women that Julie worked with told the same stories in many different circumstances with different aims in mind. Sometimes they were told in reference to past history, sometimes in relation to a personal story or a claim on a particular kind of identity, belonging to a particular grouping of people for instance, and sometimes the stories were told as advice for the future. Understanding the meaning of a story depends on the situation as well as your understanding of the context out of which the story has come, which will always influence its meaning.

Julie reflects that because stories are not fixed narratives they are often used to dismantle boundaries between different belief systems or what people in the university story houses call 'ways of knowing'. Although stories are culturally specific (and you need to understand this in context if you are to understand the stories) they are, within cultural spaces, tools for dealing with a growing globalising society characterised by rapid change. Stories often provide a broader framework within which to incorporate differing stories. Stories provide a bridge between different and new theories. They help people incorporate an unfamiliar event or idea into a larger context, which then connects the new with a previous experience. In this way stories are the container into which other stories (including those of science and western economy) can be added.

Historical stories are not only used in order to relate past events. They are told to make sense of the present with reference to the past.

This understanding of story that Julie Cruikshank shares with us is important for those of us who play the role of documenter of others stories. What Julie has understood from her involvement with the three women in the Yukon is that stories are not stable. They are used to respond to the complex and integral events, problems and triumphs of everyday life. Their fluidity does not, however, mean that they are not situated. The stories belong to other stories, to people, to a place. All three women claim their right to tell the stories before they begin. This is an important point in our treatment of others stories. Do we have the authority to tell them? Do we have the authority to remove them from the social life which they inhabit? Are we, ironically, in danger of blocking the way they are so fluidly used by removing them from this place and space in which they have been created?

Cruikshank alerts us to the way in which other's (the indigenous and 'First World') stories are being used. Indigenous stories are often re-told by scientists and environmentalists in a way that

fits contemporary environmental issues. This has been my common experience of indigenous knowledge tales, that they are used to back up already established knowledge in another social situation, e.g. the University or economic institution. This 'established knowledge' exists in the context of a particular social life, a particular worldview that is not necessarily the same as that from which the indigenous story has emerged. Is it appropriate to use stories of this nature just to reaffirm knowledge inside a different context, inside a different social life?

It is also very difficult to evaluate stories as historical and scientific data. Stories are more than just records of historical or cosmological events, or biophysical understandings, they are vivid reinterpretations of life and the stories themselves intrinsically hold a particular perspective of the world which is hard to remove or 'turn into' empirical data.

Despite all of her views about stories, and the difficulties of telling other people's stories, Julie Cruikshank still decided to document the stories of three 'first nations' women in Yukon. She documented their stories in English at the womens' request. They were written down in books and published. For the women this was not much of a concern. English was viewed as just another 'native' language, the written text just one more way of telling the story, although they insisted that it be translated exactly as they spoke rather than into grammatically correct English. This is where the lesson of this book lies for me: As documenters of stories we are merely a different type of storyteller. Again the issue does not lie in how or when the story is told but in the way in which these stories are perceived. Documenting stories, in the way Cruikshank does, is an attempt to reach beyond the arrogance of own position within own very powerful academic stories. Julie, as storyteller of her tale, heroically battles with what this means. She is an anthropologist and the importance of being a storyteller in that guise is clear in the way in which she justifies her discipline within the context of other academic disciplines. What seems to be the challenge for academic storytellers is the challenge that Julie takes up. She adopts the theoretical position of the storytellers she works with. The different narratives document a relationship between different groups and different understandings. This is the role of the social activity of story for the women of the Yukon and this is what Julia Cruikshank's text has done, it documents and comments on the relationship between two stories, that of the academy and that of 'indigenous knowledge stories'. Maybe this is a beginning to a 'happily ever after'. I see the Fairy Godmother dancing with Skookum Jim and a bespectacled Professor of Anthropology to the vibrant beat of an African Drum. Where am I?

Notes on the Reviewer

Jane Burt is artist, storyteller and PhD researcher in the Environmental Education and Sustainability Unit at Rhodes University. She is leading a Water Research Commission research programme into participation in integrated water resources management, and has a particular interest in the stories being told in the name of participation. Email j.burt@ru.ac.za.