BEYOND THE BRIAR PATCH

Affrilachian Folktales, Food and Folklore

Retold by Lyn Ford

Author Q & A and Reading Group Extras Included

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Dedicated with fondness to the memory of
Great-Grandma Essie Arkward
❧ I wish you had told me *your* story ❧

and
also with tremendous love for
Bruce
whose story is so much a part of mine.

"Listen to my story, and ev'rything'll come out true ... "
Lyrics from the song *Blue Blues*
sung by Bessie Smith (1894–1937), "Empress of the Blues,"
born an Affrilachian in Chattanooga, Tennessee

Acknowledgments

Thank You, Folks!

In the Preface to this book, and the story notes for “Fox and Crow,” I mention a wonderful storytelling journey in Kentucky. My driver on that occasion was Shane Barton, program coordinator for the Appalachian Center at the University of Kentucky; he shared funny and heartfelt stories of his large family’s gatherings and tale-tellings, and the influence that tradition had on him as he grew up. We talked about how the coal and rail industries impacted on the lives of both our families. I loved listening to his experiences as a project and program coordinator. I watched as he took a picture of a small post office for the Appalachian Kentucky Post Office Project, which is documenting the past and present contributions of post office workers and post offices in Appalachian Kentucky. Wonderful!

Dr. Sasikumar Balasundaram, Postdoctoral Scholar at the UKY Appalachian Center, is mentioned as the storyteller who, by sharing a variant of the tale, sparked a memory of and ignited a fire to tell “Fox and Crow”. Thank-you, Sasi!

Meeting us in Pikeville was Stephanie Richards, Pike County’s fine arts extension agent for the Cooperative Extension Program. Stephanie had communicated with Shane, and arranged my storytelling visit at Majestic-Knoxville Elementary School, where sixty-three attentive students joyfully participated in a day of Affrilachian folktale interaction. Stephanie spoke of returning to Appalachia from her acting work in Chicago, knowing that was what she was meant to do. She also told me of the Artists Collaborative Theatre where folks in Elkhorn City can enjoy great

entertainment all year long, and of the young people in her theater group, students who are willing to give up a tremendous amount of time to learning and sharing drama and theater management skills. I marveled at her energy and efforts, and listened with great admiration to the success stories of Pike County's interest in local arts. Unbelievably great work, Stephanie!

Without the push from my publisher and friend, Ted Parkhurst, I wouldn't have written the first book, or taken a chance on putting together this second one. Thanks, Ted!

If I hadn't enjoyed such wonderful tellers feeding my brain with stories during my childhood, I wouldn't have the material or foundation to do my storytellin' thang today. Thank you to the ancestors and elders mentioned in the Preface, especially my parents, Edward Maclin Cooper and Jean E. Arkward Cooper Matthews, who told and read stories to us in the first and foremost years, and Pop-Pops, Byard Wilmer Arkward, who made the telling of a story seem as easy as breathing. And thank you to my stepfather, the late James M. Matthews, for saying those words, "Go for it, Sissy!" when I said I wanted to try to become a full-time storyteller. He was one of my cheerleaders.

I love my children, Benjamin, Brandon, and Bonnie, and am grateful to them for pushing me into a storytelling career. They volunteered me to tell our traditional stories in their schools many, many years ago, and they have always believed in their mama. I love my husband, Bruce, and am more than grateful for his patience with my mutterings as I work, and for his blindness to my filing system—a small *mountain range* of papers wherever I'm working—as well as for his partnership as my "roadie," and for his unconditional love.

And, as always and forever, thanks to the man who made the word "the word." Frank X. Walker, you gave this storyteller and her people a name for who we proudly are, Affrilachian!

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Preface

The Rabbit In That Briar Patch?

A briar patch is a thicket of plants or bushes, dense, tangled, and thorny. Its place in literature and the arts has grown from the prickly patch Brer Rabbit claims as the place where he was "bred and born" to a dangerous nebula in the *Star Trek* movies universe.[1]

In Groveport, Ohio, Briar Patch Ranch for Kids is a farm/ranching program for at-risk students, in which youth are introduced to hands-on experiences that help them overcome past difficulties with everything from being bullied to being the bully, from severe lack of self-discipline to severe depression, from living a hard life to hardly living at all. Students as young as eight study with their teachers for half the day, then run the farm during the other half. They tend horses, handle the responsibilities of ranching, including gardening chores, work in the orchards, and merchandise produce. Older students mentor the younger ones. The work is physically hard. Mentally and emotionally, the love is tough. Through it, the students thrive and grow, as Rabbit did in his prickly home.

Bred and born in the briar patch? Yes, some rabbits are born in thickets, and some are thrown there* by mean folks like Brer Bear and Brer Wolf. Besides those born into the thickets, there are others who walk into the thicket, and realize, after a time, that they need to walk out again.

But, for my mother's and grandmother's generations of women, the symbolism of this life went far beyond a thorny place of birth. In some parts of the hills, a "briar patch child" was one who was conceived "on the wrong side of the blanket" and born

out of wedlock. Sometimes, that meant conception within an immature but loving relationship. Sometimes, it meant conception through force, without the consent of the woman who would bear this child. Although the plantation social model was not a strong contributor to the socio-economic foundation of the Appalachian region, there were breeding plantations in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, and in adjacent areas. Many of the children born into this captivity were sent to cotton and sugar plantations outside the Appalachian hills. My mother says that we are, in part, children of the families of "the Carter plantations"[2] of Virginia. The term "briar patch child" was used to refer to some of us, for we were, in part, the descendants of plantation-owning families intermixing with their captive workers.

The briar patch is a thorny situation, into which many of us have been born or pushed, or in some twisted or tricky way prone to visit it. Many rabbits' lives have begun in such circumstances, and it's a character-building experience, to say the least.

When you have lived in it—or grown through it—and come out of it, you're a different animal. The briar patch takes out the sweet, the cute, the fuzzy bunny part of one who is subjected to its twists. Appearances may be deceiving, but one who has been through the briar patch has felt the thorns of that place, and they have left their marks on the body and on the psyche.

No, do not imagine that a character—or a person—gets through the briar patch without being marked by the thorns. You may do well to think of characters like Manabozho, also known as the Great Hare, the Algonquin trickster god and warrior rabbit. And a quotation about a more familiar character that states, "If you think you can outsmart Brer Rabbit you had better read the tales again."[3] If that's too grand and too mythological an image for you, think Bugs Bunny.

Warner Brothers Cartoons, Inc. writers and illustrators knew Brer Rabbit well; they made his animated descendant the hero of many an adventure, to the chagrin of antagonists like Elmer Fudd and Daffy Duck. But they didn't seem to know how important it was to give the trickster rabbit recognition for his roots. Acknowledging the briar patch in the pedigree of these tales

is just as important in our thinking (and our storytelling) today.

In my family, the rabbit was just "Rabbit." "Brer Rabbit" was the character in the Joel Chandler Harris collections of stories gathered from the African ancestors whose "briar patch" was captivity in the Americas. In his publications of the 1800s and early 1900s, Harris gave little recognition to earlier variant tales then still being told in Africa. He did share the names of some of his sources: George Terrell and Old Harbert, Turnwold Plantation captives, during the years of 1862 to 1866 (when Harris' worked for Joseph Addison Turner as a printer's devil for Turner's newspaper, "The Countryman").[4] His attempted use of African-American dialect and creation of the narrator known as Uncle Remus are responsible for the shunning of the tales by many people of African-American heritage. I have seen people cringe at the title "brer," and some of those people were related to me.

In communities where there is little knowledge of the oral traditions and cultural connections behind the tales of Rabbit, some folks look upon Harris' narrator as a stereotype of "the happy slave." They interpret the language of his retellings as a slap in the face to literate and educated persons of color. If the Harris publications are the only versions of these stories that a person, of any "color," hears or reads, he or she has received a limited and skewed perspective of the oral traditions of an American people who are not limited to the region known as "The South," nor to a singular dialect, nor to a single cultural family from the African continent, nor to Harris' versions of the stories.

The briar patch stories told on this side of the Atlantic Ocean arrived with captive Africans. Like their bearers, the stories spread throughout the Americas. Almost immediately, those stories became a folkloric staple of their adopted cultures. Within a few generations, they were widely shared—not only in the southern United States-but also from the coasts of South American through the West Indies into the Florida Keys and all the way up the Appalachian Mountain region into Canada, wherever families of African heritage have made their homes.

The stories are a part of an ancient oral tradition that passes on both knowledge and wisdom. They are rooted in the

centuries-old trickster tales of such protagonists as Wakaima the Hare in East Africa, Zomo the Rabbit in West Africa, and Hare or Rabbit by other names in many countries across that continent. The motifs of the so-called "Brer Rabbit" tales are also a part of centuries of stories of Rabbit among the Cherokee and other Algonquin language groups, in the Sanskrit Panchatantra, and the Tio Conejo tales and El Conejito tales of Latin America. So compelling are the African briar patch stories, that they have been accepted into some threads of European-American folk stories transported from coast to coast.

These folktales are recognized today, respected, and loved by most of the world. At the same time, there was a woman in Detroit who feared my telling of such stories at her children's library, because she only knew of the persona of Harris' Uncle Remus and the Disney version of one of the oldest stories in recorded West African folktale and mythology. Until I told from my family's Rabbit stories, and shared a little of the history that I knew about them, this young mother had no idea that her family could find a connection to pre-1800 storytelling from the African Diaspora by listening to these tales.

After the program, with tears in her eyes, the woman introduced me to her children. She said, "This is the first time I ever heard a storyteller. This is the first time I knew where those stories began."

One of my daddy's proverbs was: If a gift is not shared, it seems to disappear. I say that if a gift is not also *claimed and accepted*, it disappears *for us*, but may become or remain a gift shared for and by others, at our expense. This is what has happened with some of the folktales of Rabbit and his cohorts: Bear, Fox, Lion, and others. They are recognized and claimed by many storytellers of European American (especially Southern) heritage, people whose elders also heard the stories told when they were children; they are known and loved in some regions of Europe, where the Disney version of the tar baby tale is still made available in video format. And they are unheard in some families of African American heritage, the heritage in which their traditions were born, and from which the stories grew. We must give our children all the

gifts of their families' histories, for they deserve that foundation that is a tradition from the ancient *orature* of Africa.

Thus, I use the term Affrilachian for myself and my family, and, when I can, I share historical connections. And that is why I title this work, *Beyond the Briar Patch*. I am a child of a people who were bred and born there, a receptacle of ancestral tales, and a proud warrior-rabbit myself.

Just like Rabbit, I have grown beyond the briar patch. But I have never forgotten its berry-sweet treasures. Nor its thorns. I am not afraid to return to it for the sake of my children's knowledge of self, for my own stability in this quickly-changing world, and for my storytelling audiences.

STORY NOTES

*For those few who have never heard, seen, or read the story of Rabbit's adventure, when Rabbit is captured by the villains, Bear and Wolf, he tells them they can do anything they want to him, as long as they don't throw him into the place he appears to fear the most, the briar patch. He sorrowfully pleads and begs for death in any manner, except being thrown in the briar patch. Of course, it's a trick; Rabbit knows his way around the briar patch as well as he knows his way around his enemies.

1. *Star Trek: Insurrection*. Paramount Pictures, 1998.

2. "Carter Plantations" is my mother's way of referring to the plantation property at Carter's Grove, Virginia. According to her, we are descendants of the "nonwhite" (as they were sometimes called) children of the Carter family.

3. "Native American Mythology". www.godchecker.com/pantheon/native_american-mythology.php

4. R. Bruce Bickley, *Joel Chandler Harris*. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978).

The Briar Patch and Beyond

Rabbit wasn't the only character to travel beyond the briar patch. You'll meet or be reintroduced to some others in this book. One of my favorites will be a fellow named Jack, whose ambition—or lack of it—lands him in and out of thorny troubles, too.

On a storytelling trip along winding roads, up and down richly green valleys, and alongside weathered stone hills in Kentucky, the conversations with fellow tellers in the car wandered backward to childhood memories. As I rode along, listening to others and sharing anecdotes and laughter, visions of the story-folks who populated that region and the settings of Affrilachian folktales played along the roadways. My thoughts followed four-legged critters in fables and pourquoi tales, two-legged protagonists in stories both tall and true, and both animals and people in folktales that traveled through centuries of spoken knowledge and wisdom. Like our highway, that circled bluffs and weaves along rivers, I knew that the characters of the briar patch found their way through the thorns and into places of hope beyond. I had already shared some of those stories in *Affrilachian Tales*, the first collection of narratives that friend and publisher Ted Parkhurst encouraged me to submit for publication.

I offer more of them within these pages, memories of childhood summers shared in storytelling with my father, Edward M. Cooper, and my maternal grandfather, "Pop-Pop" Byard

Wilmer Arkward, and bedtime-story readings with my mother, Jean E. Arkward Cooper Matthews. Those dear elders and many others gave me a treasure trove of folktales. Before I knew what folktales were, or that the ones I heard were rooted in the folk traditions of cultures from Africa, Europe, and the Americas, I was blessed with a very special library, a collection of literature preserved and presented in the oral tradition.

Years later, as I shared some of those stories with my own children, I felt a strong desire to know more about that special library. My attempts to retrieve, research, and revive tales that my own generation within my family may have begun to forget drew me into historical connections to the stories that my great-grandparents never told to children. The stories I found were tributes to cleverness, strength of mind and spirit, and occasionally homilies on the merits of a healthy curiosity. They included legends and humorous tales that reinforced the wisdom of a few stories my father had shared with me.

Some of the most enlightening stories carry cautionary messages of realities that young people have always faced at the hands of bad people.

I hope to honor my great-grandparents' tales of the briar patch eras of their parents' lives and their own childhoods. With respect for my father's storytelling, I have included Dad's versions of the legends of the wise and clever captive, sometimes known as John or Old John, sometimes called John the Conqueror. They were given to me in a second-hand manner, Daddy having told me he heard them as a child, or he "got them" from my great-grandfather. These were some of the stories that my grandmothers seemed to think we should forget or cast aside, "slave tales," that they considered demeaning and "low." The only shame I would ever associate with these stories would be their loss.

I know there is much more that can be shared from my very personal collection of Affrilachian folktales and lore. But some once-treasured stories have become dulled by time and fickle memory, including many of the spookers and haint tales. Perhaps another day the channel of memory may be clearer, allowing other stories through. It is a hazard of the oral tradition that some

cultural jewels lie hidden or out of focus, awaiting some unknown hint to nudge them loose from that veiled shelf on which they rest. But I have shared a trio of spooky tales here. On this day, I don't remember all of the spookers. Indeed, in what remains of my lifetime, I may not gather all of them. Still, I will do what I can to keep my family's stories and story traditions alive.

I hope that other story-catchers and story-keepers continue to lift up their histories, write down their stories, and preserve the voices of diverse African-American Appalachian peoples. In remembrance of our ancestors, and for the sake of all the world's children, it is right that we should do so.

As I wrote in my first book, *Affrilachian Tales: Folktales from the African American Appalachian Tradition*, the term "Affrilachian" was created by poet, author, and educator Frank X. Walker, in response to a very clear denial of the populations and cultural traditions of African heritage within the Appalachian region. Had he not created that wonderful word, I wouldn't have the personal power found in knowing a "name" for "us;" knowing who "we" are commands recognition from others. I also would not have that title for my first story collection.

Stories need to be collected and honored and told again, again, and again. Thus, I share a second book of beloved Affrilachian folktales with you. You may find some childish and tickly, some tinged with shadows and touched by thorns. So be it. In some way, may your reading of them help you get through your own briar patch.

CRITTERS

You've met them before.

Rabbit.

Turtle.

Wolf.

Their very names call forth well-known character types. If you haven't met them, you probably know some critters that are like them, animals in fables and fictions that eventually became a part of Appalachia's diverse folk history. Some folks might be surprised that many of these stories were dressed in the *kente cloth* (*nwentoma*) patterns of the Ashanti, or *Malian bogolanfini* or "mud cloth" long before they wore the toga of Greece, or the stereotypical country overalls seen in illustrations for the adaptations of Joel Chandler Harris and the films of Disney Studios. Good stories sometimes change their clothes, but the body, the form and framework beneath them, remains pretty much the same.

Studying the Affrilachian tradition confirms the importance of appreciating the form of the character, just as it is appropriate to recognize and honor the heart of the tale. Both character and tale remind us of an ancestral soul in the telling. We honor early tellers by carrying on the art form—storytelling—that reminds each successive generation of the immutable laws of human nature.

The Happy Place

A Somewhat Different "Briar-Patch" Tale

Rabbit was on his way back home from one adventure or another. He was thinkin' about his wife and children, and all the joy in his family. Rabbit felt good, even better than good. His heart was happy beyond happy. The day sang to him, and the rising sun shone down so warm and lovin' that it put a big smile on his face.

Rabbit hopped and sang back to the day, "I'm goin' back to my happy place, goin' back to my happy place. Like fish in the water, like birds in the air, I'm happy in my happy place."

Rabbit had his nose in the air, as he hopped proudly and sang loudly. Mouth open, eyes closed, he couldn't see where he was goin'. And he hopped right into somebody big, and furry, and kind of growly.

It was Bear.

"Rabbit, where's this happy place?" growled Bear. "I need one right about now, 'cause I ain't happy this mornin'."

Bear didn't explain his unhappiness. He just glared at Rabbit.

"Well, I really don't know where your happy place is, Bear," Rabbit politely said. "I'm goin' to my happy place. Might not be the same place as yours."

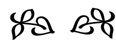
"Then take me to yours, Rabbit. I'll just take your happy

place," said Bear. And he grinned a grin that showed his teeth, in a way that was anything but happy.

Rabbit thought about his good wife and his sweet children. "Bear," he said, "I can't take you to my happy place. You have to find your own!"

Bear stood even taller. He raised his paws and out sprang his claws. He opened his mouth and out came his bad breath. Bear growled, "Rrrrrrr … Take me to your happy place right now! Or I will change your name from 'Rabbit' to 'Breakfast!'"

Well, Rabbit didn't want to change his name. And he definitely didn't want to be called "Breakfast." But he couldn't take that mean and hungry beast to the place where his family safely waited for him. And, of course, bein' the kind of critter he was, Rabbit started thinkin' up a plan.



It was only a second or three before Rabbit started walkin' alongside Bear, and singin' his song, " … I'm happy in my happy place."

Well, you know how some folks are when they're not happy? They have to make everybody else unhappy, too. Bear was one of those kind 'a folks. He started teasin' Rabbit and talkin' about him like he wasn't worth ever bein' born.

Bear snickered at Rabbit, looked him up and down, and said, "Yeah, I guess you need a happy place most days, Rabbit, 'cause nobody likes you or your kind. That's why you needed to find a happy place."

Rabbit just kept on walkin' along, singin' and smilin'.

Bear kept lookin' at Rabbit, and said, "I don't know why you got a smile on your face, Rabbit. You are one of the ugliest critters in the *holler*. Look at you, look at those big feet and those long ears and that funny li'l bunny-bun you got for a tail. Bet you needed a place to hide yourself, didn't you? That's why you needed a happy place."

Rabbit just kept on walkin' along, smilin' and singin'.

Bear laughed as he walked beside Rabbit, "Yeah, you are one pitiful … ow. I mean, you got feet so big … ouch … I bet you trip over yourself … ow … everyday … OUCH!"

Bear was so busy pickin' on that poor rabbit that he hadn't watched where he was bein' led. He was definitely bein' led somewhere. Somewhere poky!

By now he was deep in the briar patch, surrounded by thorny branches. Bear couldn't get himself out. He tried to pull his ears away from the thorns, but the fur caught and he hurt even more. Bear tried to yank his tail out of the thorns, but the fur tore and his eyes started to water. Bear cried out, "Rabbit, where … where … did you just lead me?"

Rabbit said, "Well, that depends on how you feel, Bear. Right now, how do you feel?"

Bear said, "Stuck."

Rabbit said, "Well, Bear, you want to know how I feel? I feel good, even better than good. My heart is happy beyond happy. The day is singin' to me, and the warm sun is settin' a smile on my face. "Ha! I guess, right at the moment, this is my happy place," Rabbit laughed.

Rabbit left Bear stuck in the briar patch, the place where Rabbit had been born. And he went on to his wife, his children, his family, his home, the joy that was really his happy place.

STORY NOTES

I've tried to give this story the voice of my favorite storyteller, Edward M. Cooper, known as "Jake," who was also my father. Although he could speak American business English as well as any businessman, his storytelling was often enriched by the oratorical language he shared with us, a cozy and easy transition into a kind of slang and twang that revealed Daddy's Tennessee roots. That manner of telling wasn't evident in all of his stories. I suspect that, when he told certain tales, he also shared the voice of the teller who gave the gift of that particular narrative to him.

I sometimes realize that same thing happening in my work, as well. In writing rather than telling this story, I felt a strong need to preserve its orature on the printed page. It seems only right to record a story heard orally with some of the teller's inflection and pacing intact.

This tale is a variant of the "laughing place" story collected by Joel Chandler Harris and titled "Brother Rabbit's Laughing-Place."[1] In that version, Rabbit tricks Brother Fox into seeking the laughing place in a thicket of dry bamboo briars, blackberry thorns, and honeysuckle. There was no mention of home and family.

But family was very important to my father, who worked two jobs to provide for us and help the extended family. Sundays were my dad's only full day off each week, but he spent the mornings in church, mid-day dinnertime with relatives, and afternoons mowing family lawns or weeding and planting family gardens—or repairing some aunt's television set. On a Sunday evening, it wasn't uncommon to find him re-wiring one of the clan's old homes, or even doing repairs at homes of friends, acquaintances, and community elders. All that weekend work never filled his wallet, but I think the act of helping others filled his heart to overflowing.

I believe that, no matter where he was or what he did, Dad was always in his happy place.

1. Joel Chandler Harris, *Told by Uncle Remus: New Stories of the Old Plantation*. (New York: McClure, Phillips & Company, 1905).