

30 BRAVE MINUTES, A PODCAST

THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT PEMBROKE

INTRO: Welcome to **30 Brave Minutes**: a podcast of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. In **30 Braves Minutes**, we'll give you something interesting to think about. Our topic today is Storytelling. Joining us today are Dr. Ashley Allen, Dr. Ryan Anderson, Dr. Mary Ann Jacobs, and Dr. Roger Ladd. Your host for 30 Brave Minutes is Dr. Jeff Frederick, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Frederick: Dr. Mary Ann Jacobs is an Associate Professor and Chair of the American Indian Studies Department. She teaches courses in American Indian Studies, American Indian identity, and education and cultural competency. Dr. Jacobs was previously the Director of American Indian Studies at Cal State University, Long Beach (1990-1996) and Assistant Professor of Social Work at San Diego State University (2005-2007). She completed her doctorate in Social Service Admin at the University of Chicago in 2005. Dr. Jacobs is the co-editor of one book and the author of several peer-reviewed articles, chapters, essays, and reports dealing about historical trauma, foster care, racial identity, Chicago's American Indian community, American Indian lesbian and gays, child welfare policies for Indigenous children and decolonizing methods. Welcome, Mary Ann.

Jacobs: Thank you.

Frederick: Mary Ann, tell us about some of the different storytelling traditions and practices in native communities.

Jacobs: For a long time researchers would say that American Indian communities were oral and that oral tradition was the way that all knowledge was transmitted but now we have more information about how native people wrote down things and of course it didn't look like the roman numeric alphabet that we are used to using for literature but we do have more understanding of the ways in which things were written down by native people prior to contact with Europeans and then post that, as well. But storytelling has been a part of all sorts of heritage within native communities. So it was entertainment, it was ceremony, it was spirituality. Storytelling was a way to instruct someone, it was a way to tease someone. it was a way to get somebody back into the a social norms within the community who had overstepped. Storytelling was just a way of life; that you ask an elder a question and instead of answering that question they would reply in story.

Frederick: That is really cool. What makes a story more likely to survive through multiple generations as opposed to sort of fade away?

Jacobs: Well, it was the importance of the story. These stories were: how did our people come into being? for what purpose did god make us? These stories were why we eat this berry and not that one. They were very intimately related to the individual as well as to the group, and it gave you a larger understanding of who you were and why you were important and why your group was important and it also transmitted to you all the knowledge of the land you were living on.

I was told once by a guy who does storytelling and he was saying that in native communities you try to tell the story as much like the person who told you that story so that it is passed down in as original a form as you could possibly get it.

Even though there are different versions of stories and different tellers will add more things or leave certain things out you had the responsibility to tell the story as good as you could in the same way that the original storyteller told you. All sorts of things like that, a way to make a particular type of shirt or way to make a certain regalia. It was passed down to you as a certain way; and this the way our collar should lay and this is the fold that it should take. So that was same type of attention in detail detail that storytelling had.

Frederick: Ashley Allen is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at UNCP. She earned her BA from Wake Forest University and her Ph.D. in Social Psychology from Duke University. Before coming here, Dr. Allen taught at the University of North Florida. Her research areas include self and identity concepts, such as self-compassion and self-presentation. In addition to social psychology courses, Dr. Allen teaches personality and leadership courses. The Assistant Editor of the journal *Mindfulness!*, Dr. Allen also has a love for statistics. Now there's a story! (everyone laughs) and teaches the Research Statistics courses in the psychology department.

Ashley, what is it about the human condition that leads us to create our own personal stories?

Allen: Well, sort of as we have been talking I have been thinking about this idea that people are storytellers by nature and across all cultures we see the element of storytelling, so it makes sense that we would take storytelling and apply it to our personal lives and our personal life narratives. So, there is research suggesting that at the age of three kids start to look back on past events and formulate them in these forms of stories and that really when we start integrating our personal narratives and working that out is during this time of adolescence, emerging adulthood. It is one of the things that our college students here are engaging in a lot. Trying to figure out what is their personal life narrative and how are they integrating everything that is happening in their lives and forming that into a coherent story that makes sense and has brought them to who they are today. So, I guess in that way, we are all working on our own personal narratives all the time and they are constantly changing and evolving and they are factoring in all the positive things that are happening and all the negative things that are happening, but in a way that makes sense to us. And is also affected by elements of us, so the fact that some of us are maybe more optimistic probably affects our stories. The sense of identity that we have affects our stories, and then in any given transmission of the story, when you are telling your story to somebody the audience member matters. So there are lots of different things that impact what our personal life narratives look like.

Frederick: You mentioned positive and negative. Do we incorporate positive or negative effects, events, more effectively into our personal narratives? Which seem to register more deeply?

Allen: Well, I think we integrate both into our personal narratives. The research shows, that negative life events, just these negative things that happen to us, require more integration. So they just require more reflection. I mean, think about it. If something goes wrong in your life, your first question is why? What happened? What made this occur? And that requires you to reflect on it, to figure out a reason or communicate meaning for that. Whereas when something great happens we don't reflect on it as much. We sit there and think: 'that was wonderful.' But we are not asking ourselves why...we are wonderful, I guess, so we can just move on. There is even some research that says that if you pause and reflect on positive events too much it makes them less positive. Which is kind of interesting, right?

Frederick: Over-reflection...

Allen: Yeah, so like you are taking away that positive affect by thinking about it and kind of making it more intellectual.

Frederick: Well, in thinking about how stories can evolve over time, what are the markers or cues that cause us to edit or enlarge the size of the fish we caught or change the story?

Allen: When I look at autobiographical research, according to psychologists, of these biographies that we are telling about ourselves, the purpose is not to be exactly truthful, the purpose of them is to communicate meaning, to have this cohesion. Sometimes we tell them to be funny, etc., but what we remember about our past is very much influenced by, I guess, how important it is to us, etc., so there are so

many things that we forget that just aren't meaningful...and our stories change, of course, over time. So as new events happen or as we take on new positions or as we form new relationships, things that might not have been central to our story in the past become central and things that were central to our stories in the past maybe are no longer central. So, those sorts of things happen and can impact, what our stories look like over time. In terms of the positive and negative stuff...things that I really like about that, there is a lot of research out there about having a kind of redemptive narrative for your life story or a contaminated narrative for your life story. The redemptive one is where you take the negative events that have happened and you sort of find what the positive, silver-lining in them. Like, what is the positive meaning that I have developed out of that. And then, the contaminated one, as it suggests, you see something that is really positive and it goes downhill over time and never quite comes back. You can see that in how adolescents and emerging adults (our college students), how they tell their personal life narratives. Some of them have more redemptive life stories and some have more contaminated life stories.

Frederick: Fascinating. Roger Ladd is a Professor in the Department of English, Theatre, and Foreign Languages and teaching courses in both British and World Literature, particularly medieval and early modern literature. He also teaches composition and other courses, and directs the graduate program in English Education. He is the author of one book, *Antimerchantism in Late Medieval English Literature*, and a number of essays, including one group of articles on the King Arthur story in the children's magazine *Calliope*. He also finds that many medieval

narratives, especially *Beowulf*, still make great campfire stories for Cub Scouts.

Roger, welcome.

Ladd: Thank you.

Frederick: What would you say are the hallmarks of the British storytelling tradition?

Ladd: Well, it doesn't really exist in isolation. Northern European culture, in particularly the early middle ages, the languages are inter-intelligible and so you get a story like *Beowulf*, which is about Danish people; we get texts like, there is a really interesting poetic translation of Genesis, that is actually an adaptation from Continental Old Saxon, in part, and you can tell because the lines are longer and the poetic structure is different; and then Christian culture is Latin culture and that is shared throughout western Europe or what they used to call Christendom. So you will have things like the riddle, which is a very popular monastic form in Latin, finds its way into English in one Anglo Saxon manuscript and the English ones are maybe a little bit dirtier than some of the Latin ones are. Not appropriate for a podcast, but....

Frederick: So my students are British? (everyone laughs)

Ladd: When you get into the later British tradition there is a lot more continuity with French. A number of really influential early French texts like *The Song of Roland* or the work of Marie de France, which are actually written in Britain. And so britishness, as a concept, is complicated, and they tend to be inter-referential with other texts. Originality doesn't become a literary value until well after the period that I study and

so nobody is worrying about it. They are telling, you know, their version of a story that has been told before. One of my favorites is a long narrative poem from the fourteenth century called Sir Orpheo, which is a reinterpretation of the classical Orpheus and Eurydice story as a Bretonnais. So it is adapting a Greek form into a French form in English.

Frederick: Great. (Everyone laughs)

Ladd: ...which is sort of quintessentially medieval and British. Sort of a little bit of everything, all put into a blender and what pops out is probably the best fairy story in Middle English.

Frederick: Talk a little bit about Chaucer. Why do those stories fit so prominently into the way in which we start to understand human nature and the similarities and differences?

Ladd: Well, I think one of the things that is interesting in Chaucer, as a storyteller, is that he is very interested in different kinds of stories, and so when he puts together his story collection he has a different approach from anybody before him who has done that. Contemporaries of him like Boccaccio or his acquaintance John Gower write large story collections where the stories are relatively similar. Gower's vary more than Boccaccio's. They both tend to go back and forth between higher and lower culture. Some of Boccaccio's are very low, and some are very high. And some of them are in common. The Clerk's Tale from the Canterbury Tales is adapted from Boccaccio. There are number of tales in common with Gower as well. Chaucer varies

more. He isn't trying to make things consistent. He is trying to experiment, I think, with just about every narrative form that is in play in the broader European culture of his era. He's got allegories, he's got jokes, he's got romances with heroism, he's got anthologies of stories of dead people, which are spectacularly dull. (laughs) I mean the Monk's tale is so dull that somebody almost falls off his horse by nodding off in the pilgrimage. And because of that variety it lets him experiment with all of the different possibilities. Some of them have proven to have real staying power. The Shipman's Tale, which is one of the _____ or humorous stories, was collected in the 1960s as a joke orally in South Carolina. The tale had circulated orally separately from Chaucer or had gone orally from someone reading Chaucer to make a great joke and was collected by an academic who said, oh my gosh, that is the Shipman's tale.

Frederick: Stories have long legs, don't they?

Ladd: They do, and they move around.

Frederick: Great. Ryan Anderson's desk has long featured a post-it on which he has written: tell a good story. That charge guides both his teaching and scholarship. As an Associate Professor of History he helps students sort through how Americans thought about and shaped the histories of childhood and youth, masculinity, and popular culture since the late-19th century. As a scholar he writes and speaks about how late 19th and early 20th century Americans used stories to negotiate what the creation of modern America meant. He has published on memorization, memorialization, and college life, boys' reading habits and education, and American

Indian kinship and federal aid during the Great Depression. His first book, *Frank Merriwell and the Fiction of All-American Boyhood* was released last year by the University of Arkansas Press. It considers how turn-of-the-century children worked with and against adults while creating a new genre of popular fiction, the schoolboy sports story, which defined boyhood in modern America. At the moment, the "good stories" he is most engaged with include a new project examining the working lives of young caddies at the Pinehurst golf resort where it should be noted Ryan is a virtual scratch golfer, (laughing) and reading and discussing the comic book series Bone with his son, Max. Welcome, Ryan.

Anderson: Hey, good to be here.

Frederick: Talk about how men and women use story differently. Do they collect them differently? Do they tell them differently?

Anderson: Well, I think that we tend to think that men and women have very different perspectives when it comes to the stories they tell, and why they tell them. I tend to think that what we think of the differences really tends to say more about us than about the people involved. I think that men and women tell different stories for very similar reasons. They want to understand who they are and where they are and when they are. For a long time, I think historians tended to assume that what men and women were reading, particularly the late 19th and early 20th century time period that I focus on were drastically different. There was a women's reading that sort of took its head from Louisa May Alcott's description of it as 'scribblings of women', from light romances and poetry and that kind of thing and then, there was the men's

reading. Men's reading followed romantic, almost Ivanhoe-esque tales and the hard sciences and political treatises of the time. A lot of the more interesting scholarship to come out in the last ten or fifteen years has suggested that when you actually look at what people read and talked about that these sorts of boundaries were very blurred. I think about somebody like Christine Stancil who looks at groups like a literary club in Greenwich Village made up of bohemians at the turn of the 20th century called Hederodoxy, which from outside appearances looks like educated, cutting edge women in a women's book club, but they are reading stuff that women shouldn't be reading. They are reading science, they are reading politics and discussing these things. Are they women reading or are they thinkers reading? It is kind of hard to determine. Even in my most recent work I looked at a kids story, but one of the things I was surprised to find was really how many adults read kids books and some of these sort of divisions that we have, that women and men use stories or read stories for certain reasons, I think are things that current researchers really question. That probably gives us a little more insight than we used to have into how people actually live and what people actually thought, and what was important. That's what stories ultimately are; they tell us what is important.

Frederick: Part of the rights of passages in society that take us from being a boy to a man or a girl to a woman, is collecting a certain set of experiences and then turning them into stories. Has that changed over time?

Anderson: Yeah. I think what has changed about it is who drives that process.

Particularly in Pre-American Civil War literature, was usually an adult. It is very

didactic. The adult teaching a kid a lesson. You take somebody like Joseph Abbott's series of books, *The Rollo Adventures*. Rollo is, to be quite honest, insufferable as a little kid. He is a real pain. In the very first book *Rollo at Work*, you meet Rollo at (age) 5 and he tells his father, "Father I would like to make money." His father says, "Then you will have to work hard for money," and sets Rollo to picking rocks out of the garden. Rollo finds this boring and he quits. So for dinner that night everybody in the family has beefsteak, while Rollo must eat only bread and butter. Of course he eventually learns, 'well, if I want money I must work at this job no matter how little I like it.' By the time we get to the 20th century, kids are driving the stories. You really see children being these people who almost innately know how it is they themselves should become adults. That says a lot about what Americans were worried about when it came to children. Pre-1870s, pre-second industrial revolution, people assumed that American adults were basically who they were as kids. A boy became a man almost despite who he was as a boy. You really didn't need to guide kids into adulthood, that there were these natural guideposts that kids could just follow. Your family was very important. By the turn of the 20th century we had already seen an emergence of an array of child-savers: psychologists, pediatricians, expert teachers, coaches, Boy Scout advisors; the sorts of people who are expected to help parents guide their children through very specific activities that will sort of martial them through a mini-evolutionary process; recapitulation theory, G. Stanley Hall called it. I think that the shift towards stories that see kids as the people who know how to mature themselves at a time when that is actually not happening, when kids freedom is actually dissipating, is telling because I think it reveals that we were worried about

whether or not we were messing up our kids. We were worried about whether we had made the right kind of decisions, whether or not the economy that was developing - the industrial and consumer economy - was going to so change American values that kids wouldn't know how to become a good adult. So, if our fictional kids could figure it out by adopting the types of advice real-life adults were giving their own kids, then that was comforting on some level. I think the interesting thing is that by the turn of the 20th century kids are not passive. They are actively engaging with literature. Again we talk about boundaries and we think certain boundaries are natural. One of those boundaries is that there is an adulthood that is distinct from childhood and that adult reading is different from child reading. I think that is completely wrong. Kids read and interact with adults through stories in a much more sophisticated fashion than we sometimes recognize.

Frederick: In all of the work that each of you do, what are the limits of factual accuracy when it comes to storytelling? How close, how plausible does a story have to be in order for it to get purchased, either individually or in a society?

Allen: That's a good question. So, in terms of our personal life narrative, I think it needs to have some basis in fact. Although we know, and memory research tells us, that we don't remember things accurately. Even when we think we we flash-hold memories, people tend to think that those are more accurate than our regular memories and research suggests that they are not. As time passes our accuracy decreases, in terms of what we remember and how we remember it, in terms of whether or not it is correct. I think that in order to be incorporated into a life

narrative, it needs to have some accuracy to it, at least in the mind of the individual who is constructing their life narrative, it needs to be accurate in that sense for it to have meaning and integration. I think yes, but of course it is limited at the personal level.

Anderson: People tend to remember stories and use stories according to, as a historian, when and where they are alive. The set of stories that I looked at in my recent work involved a love triangle between a main character and two very different kinds of girls and there was a lot of debate among the readers and the author about which one of the girls he should end up with. Ultimately, (he) picked one of the two women. When I was researching I found this letter from the 1950s, so almost 60 years has passed and there is this group of 50 and 60 year old women in NYC who have a reading club and they have written the publisher Street & Smith and said, Look, we all read these stories that were boys stories when we were girls because our brothers had them. What we remember is this romance element. So what we remember as important is that he ended up with this girl - her name was Ensa something, but what was the name of the girl that upset him so much that he couldn't marry her? That is not actually what happened. So, what these women were choosing to remember about the stories, a half a lifetime later and take the time to write a letter to the publishers to ask about it, perhaps says more about their own unhappiness at that point in their life, or what they chose to remember about that story as mothers, themselves, perhaps. By that point in life they've got daughters and sons who are in their late teens and twenties and starting their own relationships. It is the 1950s and America is very concerned about creating these very hetero-normative, very safe

households to fight communism at home and abroad, so maybe that had something to do with what they were talking about.

Ladd: I think older texts tend to approach truth value from different directions. A lot of spiritual writing, like saints lives and things like that, would be in the category of 'told as true,' at this point we cannot confirm that St. Edmond's severed head called to the searchers from the bushes for them to find it and bury it with the rest of his body out to the Viking's left.

Frederick: Oh, that will make a movie. (laughs)

Ladd: But in the hagiographical vita of St. Edmond, that is one of the key miracles that is a component of his canonization and is an important image of his relationship with the natural world and perhaps an implicit repudiation of... there is a wolf involved, so there is a little bit of repudiation of earlier pagan belief and association with wolves and the battle dead in Germanic pagan religion. So it is told as true, and it is believed, but it is not believed in the way that anybody thinks they can go find the spot in the woods where it happened. But then you put a lot of other stories in the category of exempla, which are meant to have some truth value - capital T - but aren't necessarily meant to be something that ever really happened to a person, so there are lots of stories with the clear moral interpretation that the reader or hearer is expected to get from it, but there is never any expectation that it necessarily represents historically verifiable events, and in many cases they are historically impossible events, which is fine.

Frederick: Mary Ann, do different tribes tell versions of the same story? And, if the story ever involves the two tribes over some conflict or some common experience, how closely or how differently do they remember those events?

Jacobs: Yes. It reminds me of Navajo and Apache stories. Navajo and Apache people used to be the same group. If you ask them, they will tell you that they used to be the same tribe, although tribe is not really an accurate name for what the people would have called themselves. If you ask an Apache person, they will say that they couldn't hang with the Navajos because of this, that and the other; and the Navajo people will say those Apaches were too violent, we couldn't stay with them. They do have different versions of similar things. They might share similar territory, using the same animals or plants but for different reasons. They might have a different relationship with corn. How did corn come to be in your community? And they will have a different story about how that came or they will have a different story about how buffalo came to be so central in the lives of that group. It will be slightly different interpretations of very similar types of stories. In terms of truth-telling, you have to look at native American stories like you look at the story of Adam and Eve in the Bible. Origin stories for native people were different. Some peoples came out of the sky world and they crossed over a bridge and this one particular California group that I am thinking of crossed over a skybridge on to the land and some of them fell on to the water and they became dolphins and that is how the tribe is related to dolphin people. Other people will have themselves tunneling out of the earth and coming out of the earth like coming out of a womb and that is how people were born. Zuni people look at themselves as coming into the earth raw and then as they mature into adulthood they

become fully cooked. They believe that coyote tried to make some people, but he really couldn't make any good people, so they turned into dogs. There are all sorts of these stories. It is not correct to say that they are untrue. Origin stories are not told as fairy tales. They are not just good stories to tell to children. They are told and they give land markers and they tell people where they came out of, so there are all sorts of elements within the story that you can actually go and document. You can actually go to that place and see where this event supposedly happened. At Bear Butte in Utah, there is what looks like indentions in it, because of the structure of the rock. But there is an origin story that says that a bear and another animal had a fight on that butte and that the bear scratched the butte and that is why it looks the way it does. When you say, are these stories true? Yes, they are true for those people in their homelands and they are very important and looking at them and talking about them as myth or lore is sometimes offensive to those people, as if you would say that the Adam and Eve story is a myth or lore. So it is a very different way of thinking about truth-telling.

Frederick: We only have a minute left, so let's close today with a contemporary question. Give me a quick snapshot response: Do you think that the current 21st century generation, the millenials, their reliance, their exposure to technology will change the way in which they will tell stories to their own kids?

Allen: That is a very cool question actually, so it is not something that I have thought about, but in terms of our own personal narrative and the fact that now we are tweeting in 150 characters...

Frederick: with a picture of our lunch.

Allen: You can't do a lot of integration in that tiny little snapshot. You cannot communicate a ton of meaning in a little Facebook post, but maybe because they are being put forth more frequently, it's forming this sort of memory stack. We don't have journals anymore, but we can go back to our Facebook page or our Twitter account and go through it and kind of figure out you can see how you have changed over time, by scrolling through it or how your life story is changing or evolving over time, which I think is pretty interesting. I don't know if it is making it better or worse, but it certainly is making it different. That would be my response.

Frederick: Do you all find your kids telling stories similar to the way you would have?

Ladd: My kids read a lot so they have not necessarily converted over to a completely digital take on literacy. But truthfully, the movement of text into electronic formats is not that different from the advent of writing in the first place, or the advent of printing, both of which caused significant hand-wringing and hair-pulling over, "what are people's memories going to do? To some extent we know that memories did deteriorate. It used be common, for example, for academics to memorize all of their textbooks. There are known examples from the middle ages of scholars who had been exiled to the middle of nowhere still referring to their library because it was all in their head, which is a nice trick and I wouldn't be able to do it. So we know that we have lost things over the way, that our reliance on print would make some of our distant ancestors think of us as complete light-weights. But that kind of thing happens all the time, that we have been tweaking our way of saving words. Each advantage

has relative advantages and disadvantages. Oral memory works quite well. It is especially good at kind of pulling out the core essence of stories as the part that we remember, whereas print makes it a little easier to get caught up in minutiae.

Anderson: Right. And I think of the story that our daughter Annie wants to hear most often. It's *Tell me about the day I was born*, which is a fairly universal kind of question to want answered, and to want to hear about. She wants to know about Mom being in the delivery room, and Dad was getting lunch, and they had to call out on the P.A. for Dad to come running. Dad had to stop at the door and there was a Robot coming through dispensing medicine. Dad joked that the robot war had started and get ready, here comes terminator, but no, he couldn't fight the robot now because Annie was being born.

Ladd: You have got to have your priorities, right?

Frederick: I would see that movie, too. (everyone laughs)

Anderson: Yeah. In some ways it doesn't matter how we tell the story or what medium we tell the story in, there are certain universal qualities we will always want. I was listening to one of my favorite podcasts the other day, WTF with Mark Marin...

Frederick: ...that is your second favorite podcast....(everyone laughs)

Anderson: I'm sorry, that is my second favorite now, he said to the Dean. And he was interviewing Ron Perlman, who most people recognize as..

Jacobs: I haven't gotten to it yet, so don't tell it all.

Anderson: Alright, I will tell something that won't hurt the content of the podcast. Ron Perlman was talking about his history in acting and they were talking about how different it is now to get into acting or to be good storytellers. Perlman gave what I thought was a really old school, get off my lawn, kind of answer by saying that the edifice doesn't exist anymore. He said in the 60s and 70s if you wanted to put on a play, you had to build it by hand. You had to convince someone to finance it, you had to find the theater, you had to do all of this stuff. That was the editing process, so maybe you didn't get as many stories out there as you do today where kids are using technology to tell stories or to make their own movies or get them on line, but what you got was really good, in a lot of ways. There was control. He was ambivalent and I thought that was an interesting thing to keep in mind. Technology has really opened up the doors for so many more people; musicians, actors, storytellers, political thinkers, to say much more. It has gotten much tougher to figure out who to listen to, and what it all means sometimes.

Frederick: Many thanks to the panel today for the fascinating discussion on storytelling: Dr. Ashley Allen, Dr. MaryAnn Jacobs, Dr. Roger Ladd, and Dr. Ryan Anderson. Thanks for your time today. Thank you to all who are listening and if you are enjoying it, pass it on to a friend. Check back next month for another podcast from the College of Arts and Sciences.

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