

Beyond the Briar Patch: Affrilachian Folktales, Food, and Folklore

Lynette Ford

Parkhurst Brothers Publishers (Oct 30, 2014)

Softcover \$17.00 (160pp)

978-1-62491-025-8

The stories in this collection give dignity to the full measure of the African American—indeed the human—experience.

In *Beyond the Briar Patch: Affrilachian Folktales, Food and Folklore*, storyteller Lynette Ford highlights the heart, humor, history, and humanity of African American stories.

The briar patch of the title signifies a place of trouble. As such, the stories feature characters who overcome adversity (get beyond the briar patch) but are forever marked by it in good and bad ways. These kinds of stories have a long history that crosses cultures and continents. Generations of Americans are familiar with Joel Chandler Harris's Brer Rabbit stories; the controversies that have been stoked by these stories (use of dialect and the subservient, happy slave figure of Uncle Remus) have alienated many. But Ford reclaims these historically significant mythic stories, shunning racism and patronizing attitudes, to show the deeper historical roots of these common themes and characterizations. As a result, the stories in this collection give dignity to the full measure of the African American—indeed the human—experience.

The stories are filled with engaging characters: from animals (turtle, rabbit, grasshopper, crow, and more), to an everyman named John, to the devil himself. The plots, characters, and themes have a familiar, homey, fable feel. At the end of each story, Ford inserts notes about the story, its origins, and its cultural and societal implications.

Ford's voice is the highlight of the book. Storytelling, and the stories themselves, are in her blood; they spring from her lifelong listening and diligent cultural study. The style and diction are steeped in rich oral storytelling tradition. While Ford steers clear of excessive dialect, the words are conversational and precisely chosen; for example, the book is divided into sections titled "Critters," "Folks," and "Spookers and Haints."

While the stories are easy to understand on their own, the glossary adds more clarity—providing not only the definition of *corn cake* but also insight into the debate about what sets it apart from corn bread.

The book is written for adults but keeps younger generations in mind. The stories are simple, yet the ideas they convey are deep and complex—making them of great value to pass along to children. This book is a great read-aloud for the whole family.

The cover photo hints at the tone of the book, but the type and imagery don't mesh into a cohesive design. The inclusion of Ford's family photos in the middle of the book gives a personal, but perhaps too personal feel.

Beyond the Briar Patch shares a rich narrative history.

MELISSA WUSKE (December 9, 2014)

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