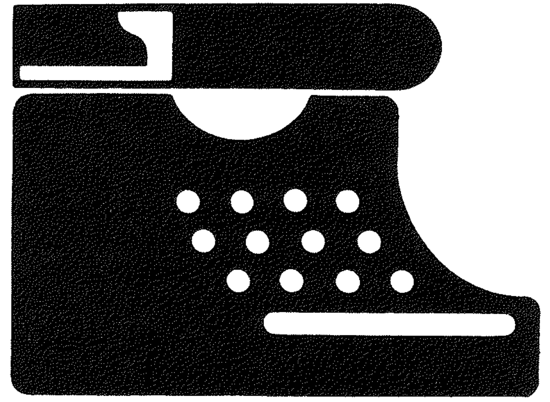
Teachers & Writers



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Writing about the Folklore of Childhood

by Elizabeth Radin Simons

WHEN I START THIS TOPIC, THE STUDENTS HAVE already had an introduction to folklore and know what it is, so I plunge right in by asking, "Tell me some of the games you played as a child, ones you learned from other children." Some classes answer in a big competitive rush, others take their time as they warm to the subject. In one class the list developed this way.

"Jacks?" Rocio asks tentatively; she is not quite sure what I am after. "Good," I say, and then because this is a prewriting as well as a brainstorming session and I want to encourage details to use later in writing, I ask, "What do you remember about playing jacks?"

Lorenzo interrupts and starts laughing, "You start from 'onesies' and 'twosies?'" Everyone joins him laughing at the memory of "onesies and twosies." Maria suddenly remembers "Cherry in the basket!" and laughs. "What else do you remember?" I prod.

No hands are raised yet, but from somewhere in the back of the room I hear another tentative suggestion: "Jump rope?" "Good," I say, "Do you remember any jump rope rhymes?"

"Teddy bear, teddy bear," Olga chants, imitating a young child, and everyone laughs again. Gradually the girls begin to remember their jump rope rhymes: "Windy, windy, weather. . . ," "I was born in a frying pan. . . ," "Ice cream soda, with a cherry on top. . . ," "Apple on a stick, makes me sick. . . ." Rocio is getting impatient with the jump rope rhymes; she wants to talk about something else. "I don't remember what it was called with the hands?" Lorenzo helps her out: "Patty clap." Suddenly the class remembers the elaborate handclapping games the girls used to play. In some classes, more extroverted students try to demonstrate the handclapping. Often they cannot remember the words and have lost their touch, but they enjoy trying to regain their childhood skills. In this class, the girls are shy about demonstrating. The reminiscing continues. Lorenzo suddenly remembers a popular playground game and shouts out, "The boys against the girls!" The class is laughing again when someone quips, "We still do that!"

The opening discussion introducing children's folklore is a pleasure. High school students are nostalgic about childhood. One reason is perhaps that childhood, so strong and sweet

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IN THIS ISSUE

1 **Writing about the Folklore of Childhood** by Elizabeth Radin Simons

8 **Who Wrote This** by Anselm Hollo

9 **1968: A Student Generation in Revolt** Review by Cynthia Stokes Brown

10 **Letters**

and poignant, seems so far away that it makes adolescents feel adult. Left to their own devices, students would happily reminisce for days about their childhood. One strong appeal of this unit is that it allows students, for a few weeks, to relive their childhood.

The study of the folklore of their childhood starts with nostalgia, but as it unfolds, students begin to understand that their early play was more than entertainment. In their childhood games, they tried out future adult roles; when, for example, they played with Barbies or "dressed up" or played war. They learned sex roles playing house. They acted out being "bad" when they played Chicken or Doctor. In their play they were getting an education, learning the values, attitudes, beliefs, and behavior that would continue into their adult lives.

After the entire class does some preliminary brainstorming on children's folklore, the students break up into groups of four. Usually at this time I segregate the sexes because many of the games of childhood are gender-specific, and on this topic they seem to do better brainstorming in such groups. I give directions first. "In each group," I tell them, "try to remember as many kinds of games and play as you can that you did as children. Each time you mention a game, talk about it. Try to remember as many details as you can." In each group, one person is the scribe, who writes down the games as they are mentioned.

Most groups do fine, but to spot groups that are floundering, I circulate and listen in. If the memories aren't flowing, I drop a few hints. For a group of girls I might ask, "Did you play with Barbies?" or "Did you have slumber parties?" or "Did you play with dolls?" For groups of either sex, I mention Door Bell Ditch and prank telephone calls.

Day Two: The Master List

The next day each group reports, and together we make a master list on the chalkboard. The master lists usually have between one hundred and one hundred and fifty items. The volume surprises the students—they have remembered a lot of folklore from their childhoods.

Speculative talk accompanies the making of the list. Students discuss, for example, which games they think their parents and their grandparents played.

I ask about gender-specific games. Which are girls' games, which are boys' games, and why? We talk about age too. At what age was a game played? And as we add items to the list, we speculate a little about function; why do children play these games? The discussion that accompanies the making of the list is not definitive. It is relaxed, exploratory talk about issues that will be more fully addressed later on.

Day Three: Choosing a Topic and Writing the First Draft

"Take a look at the master list," I tell the class, "and choose a game that you liked to play when you were young." Many students know immediately what they are going to write about. Their faces light up as they remember. For the students who look blank at this point, I suggest that they think back to a game they loved as a child, perhaps a game they played often and remember in some detail.

After the students choose their topics, they do some prewriting on it, maybe a brainstorm, or talk their memories over with a partner.

After the prewriting, it is time for first drafts. "Write down everything you can remember," I tell them. "If you are writing about 'levitating' at a slumber party, try to remember the details, such as what you chanted. Was it 'Light as a feather, stiff as a board?' If you were levitated, describe how it felt." I remind the students that this is a first draft, a place to get ideas, and that they shouldn't worry about producing polished writing. I also suggest they try to include enough description of the game or play so that a reader unfamiliar with it could play it from reading their account. Often in the first draft, however, students focus more on their memories, and the careful explanation of how to play gets incorporated in a later draft.

In a suburban classroom studying children's folklore, Jane Juska and I team-taught. For this assignment she stipulated that the memory be written in first person and in the present tense to create a sense of immediacy. One student, Lynn, wrote of playing Red Light, Green Light:

> Coming home from grade school, I can't wait to change out of my school clothes and into a pair of jeans, grubby, old and faded. It seems the whole neighborhood is in the same state of excitement, for everyday at approximately 2:30 PM we kids meet in the park by the drinking fountain, dressed in play clothes and ready to play "Red Light, Green Light." Standing in a circle, our fists thrust into the center, we wait as a boy, his brown hair messy from running, counts out, "Eenie—Menie—Miny—Mo." This is one game when everyone wants to be it. Calling "Green light" and watching the pack of kids scrambling forward to tag you before you yell "Red Light" is always fun. We play until the sun sets in the west and we're weary and rosy-cheeked from running in the cool autumn air.

In an inner city classroom, a boy named Lue wrote:

> Shooting craps is a game of luck and cheating. If you cheat good enough you don't need luck. First you need players, dice and money. You need to be alert because some people use loaded dice. The first man makes a certain number and in order to win you must match your number. When people win they become happy but when they lose (crap) they get mad and sometimes fight. . . . But there are dangers if someone sees you playing they might tell your parents. Once your parents find out your dice throwing hand will be broken. Oh yea, if you roll a one or a seven you crap.

Lue's classmates laughed at his humor, especially his opening lines. Lue was a senior, and although he was a skilled talker, he had not done well in writing. At first he was incredulous that his off-the-cuff draft was a success. But when he realized that he could entertain on paper as well as orally, he began to enjoy writing. The students who hadn't shot craps, however, did have a suggestion. From his description they could not play craps; they requested more details and information.

These early drafts are valuable. From them I learn about the early years of my students and I learn more folklore. I also learn about regional and ethnic variations on traditional folklore. Olga, a Mexican-American student, wrote a draft on hopscotch. "In the middle of the street I would start drawing the game while Rose got a bowl of water and thread," she wrote. "Why a bowl of water and thread?" I asked. "We played with the water and thread because it was easier for wet thread to land on the number, not like other little objects that you throw and which bounce and roll away." I told Olga about the small, flat stones I used as a child, and called "potsies." I liked the idea of thread and water, a nice variation.

These drafts, the memories of childhood play, are usually a good read. The content is compelling because the students like the subject and are in control of their material, which comes from their lives.

Day Four: Responding and Revising

If students revise their writing and complete the unit now, the purpose of the unit is simply to write a memory piece. For a longer alternative unit, the memory piece could also be a catalyst for exposition, to be incorporated into a larger paper on childhood folklore. To begin this, students now read their drafts in small groups, get responses, and do a first revision. They then store the papers in their writing folder, to be retrieved later.

A fuller study of children's folklore, however, requires at least another week of research (in the form of interviews) and analysis of the folklore.

Day Five: Starting the Research—Interviewing

To study children's folklore, students need information beyond their memories. Like professional folklorists, the students gather much of their information through interviews. I ask them to interview three people: an older person who remembers playing the game as a child, a peer who also remembers the game, and a child who is still playing it.

Together we devise the interview questionnaire, discussing what type of information we want to gather. Each student makes up several questions. From these questions we select the best ones and create a questionnaire. If the class does not suggest numbers one through five on the questionnaire (below), I add them, and these are required. Beyond the first five questions, the students decide what to include. I offer a few hints, such as avoiding questions that can be answered "Yes" or "No."

Children's Folklore Interview Questionnaire

1. Interviewer's name ____________________
2. Interviewee's name and age ____________________
3. Date and place of the interview ____________________
4. The topic (Hide and Seek, for example)
5. How did you learn to play? ____________________

____

____

Here is a list of questions one class used:

- Do you remember the first time you played "Hide and Seek"?
- What is the best part of the game?
- What do you need to play?
- Did you get into any fights or arguments?
- How many people play?
- Where do you play?
- How does it feel to win? lose?
- Do both girls and boys play? Why?
- What is the purpose of playing?
- What kind of people did you play with?
- How often did you play?

Before interviewing outside class, students practice on one another. Two volunteers conduct an interview in the front of the room while the class watches and takes notes. Afterwards we discuss what worked and what needed adjustment.

Lorenzo, who was studying Smear the Queer, agreed to do an interview, and Miguel, who remembered playing it, agreed to be the interviewee. Before starting, I asked them which interviewers they liked on TV. "Barbara Walters," Lorenzo answered. "Good," I told him, "Pretend you're Barbara Walters."

"I got to stand up right here?" Lorenzo asked, having some second thoughts about conducting his interview in front of the class. Helpfully, Miguel asked, "You got your list, man?" Increasingly uncomfortable, Lorenzo asked, "My what? I have to stand up here by myself?" I suggested he invite Miguel to join him in the front of the class.

"I have to stand up too?" Now Miguel was having second thoughts. Always resourceful, Lorenzo hit upon a solution, "Here get a chair, man, can we get a chair? That's the way Barbara Walters—" Before he had finished speaking, everyone was laughing.

Lorenzo was not at ease, which was not surprising, he had never done this before, and the whole class was watching. To mask his embarrassment, Lorenzo spoke in stilted mocking tones, imitating formal interview style. "Umm, umm, umm, umm, what is your name?" he began. The class laughed. Miguel played it straight, however, and the interview proceeded.

M: Miguel.
L: How old are you, Miguel? [laughter]
M: Seventeen right now.
L: What nationality are you? [laughter, everyone in this class is Hispanic]
M: Mexican-American.
L: Okay, do you remember the first time you played?
M: Played what?
L: Smear the Queer.
M: Yeah, in junior high.
L: Why?
M: 'Cause everybody else did it.
L: How did you learn?
M: I was—I watched my friends do it.
L: What was the best part of it, of playing Smear the Queer with your friends?
M: Hitting somebody, hitting somebody, hitting somebody you didn't like.

L: Do you still play this game since you are older now?
M: No.
L: What do, oh damn, did you get in fights or arguments?
M: Yeah.
L: Why?
M: [Laughs] 'Cause somebody thought they'd hit 'em on—you know, somebody'd get hit and they didn't have the ball or something.
L: Go on. Is that it?
M: That's it.
L: What did you gain by playing this?
M: Bruises, bruises, brother. [laughter]
L: Did your mother approve of this game?
M: No [laughs] she didn't know about it actually.
L: How many people played?
M: I think it was about ten guys.
L: Did you guys play with a football, softball, can, or pillow?
M: No, we played with a football.
L: How does it feel to hit somebody, I mean just really hit 'em? [laughter]
M: If it's somebody you don't like, it doesn't matter, it doesn't make a difference.
L: How did it feel when you got hit?
M: When I got hit, man, I felt like hitting somebody else.
L: Was it fun?
M: Yeah, sometimes when there wasn't any fights.
L: Is it for boys and girls? And why?
M: One girl played, she got stuck [slang for "hit"] though. [laughter]
L: So you're saying this is only for boys.
M: I'm not saying that, I'm referring to the fact that [laughter] that ladies can play but they have to take it like everybody else, not just like a man but like everybody else does.
L: I agree with you. What kind of people did you play with? You know, were they older than you?
M: No they were my age but they were like, they were big.
L: How often did you play this game?
M: Oh, I think every day—at lunch.
L: Did you ever get in trouble playing this game with the principal or you know—
M: No, the security guards stopped us from playing like that.
L: Did you guys go to jail?
M: Ne-ver.
L: Have you ever been convicted of a crime?
M: No, [laughter] you're getting off the subject, man.

When the interview was over, the class critiqued it, starting with what they liked about it. "The fun!" Martin said. Good point. I elaborated by telling the class to enjoy interviewing, to make it fun for themselves and at the same time to help the interviewee relax. We complimented Lorenzo. I noted that several times he had departed from the list of questions, which is good. Ad-libbed questions can be the heart of an interview. Lorenzo added these questions: "Did your mother approve of this game?" "How does it feel to hit someone, really hit them?" "Did you ever get in trouble [playing Smear the Queer]?" These questions elicited relevant information. They added to the interview because Lorenzo really was curious about the answers. By comparison his last question was not appropriate. He had a dilemma; he didn't know how to end the interview gracefully, so he resorted to the playful way he and Miguel normally relate. However, Miguel wouldn't let him get away with it and gently brought him back to the task at hand.

The class had enjoyed Lorenzo's humor. Many of the students in this class were poor. As children they had by necessity been masters of invention in their childhood games, something they were proud of and often joked about. When Lorenzo asked, "Did you play with a football, softball, can, or pillows?" he was referring to their improvisations, and his joke was appreciated.

While Lorenzo had asked a few spontaneous follow-up questions, he had overlooked other good opportunities. For instance, Miguel mentioned that he remembered the first time he had played the game, but Lorenzo didn't follow it up. During the class discussion of the interview, Miguel described the first time:

> M: Well my friend—one of my friends—told me to come in and play cause he used to just watch me sit there, watching them play, so he told me to go out there and play, and I was scared at first because most of them guys were pretty big. But then, so I went there and after you hit somebody, you know, you get used to being hit. So I was cool but when I got hit, I got mad—

Maria interrupted Miguel, "I have a question: did you guys hit each other hard?"

"Friends we didn't hit them that hard, we just kind of bumped them and that's it, but people we didn't like, we stuck 'em," Miguel explained.

Since I wanted the students to be constantly thinking about following up promising answers, I pointed out two other answers that I would have followed with more questions. I was curious about the girl who played; I wanted to know more about her. Also I noticed that during the interview Miguel often mentioned fighting, often joking about it. It seemed an important part of the game, but when asked what made a good game, he said a good game didn't have any fights. I would have asked Miguel to explain this contradiction.

In the discussion that followed the interview, no one brought up the title of the game. The game, a common one, is widely known as Smear the Queer but has other names, such as Kill the Pig and Get the Man with the Ball. It is a folk game that is a kind of preparation for football. The game is best played with a group. One player throws the ball, another catches it and then tries to break away from the pack and avoid being tackled. The player who catches the ball is the "queer," and if he fails to get away, he gets "smeared."

Part of the appeal of folklore in the classroom is that it is real—folklore tells it like it is. This game carries in its title a prejudicial message about homosexuality. The message reflects societal values. When teaching folklore, it is imperative not to gloss over the complexity and contradictions inherent in folklore. In this case the students need to discuss the title. Was this a bad game? Were the kids learning prejudices playing it? Essentially folklore is many faceted and embodies contradictions. The students can discuss this, and Smear the Queer is a perfect example. Miguel's memory of

the game was complex—sometimes it was fun, sometimes it was too violent. It is important that he not be made to feel guilty about the title; he didn't name it. The game needs to be evaluated and part of the evaluation is to recognize the subtle ways in which prejudices permeate society, how they are learned unconsciously by children playing games. An interesting contradiction to consider is that the queer, the boy who catches the ball, when he gets away from the pack, is the hero. All the boys want to catch the ball and successfully pull away from the crowd. Furthermore, not all children playing the game know the word *queer* as a pejorative for homosexual.

Two more issues in interviewing are note-taking and serendipity. For a project this size where the interview is not lengthy, it is relatively easy to keep a running written record of answers while seeking questions. (Tape recorders, if available, are ideal.) The other issue is serendipity. Often the most informative part of an interview occurs accidentally or incidentally in asides, or before and after the interview. While asking the questions on their list, students should be aware of these serendipitous moments.

Homework for the next two nights is to conduct at least three interviews. The interviews can be eye-openers. Rhonda, for instance, discovered that her friend Mary's recollection of Simon Says differed with hers. Rhonda's memory of the game was dominated by the competitive pressure she felt while playing. She remembered:

> When playing the game, I tend to get a little tense, tight, stiff, also a bit of a headache from carrying out commands, from the sunshine beaming down on the top of my head, from the fear that I might lose and from the excitement that I might win.

Mary, Rhonda's interviewee, remembered violence. She explained, "Simon would say, 'Simon Says slap Jane Doe,' and you would have to slap her or be out of the game."

Day Six: Scholarly Analysis of Children's Folklore

In preparation for the analysis of their folklore, students look through the analytical works of professional folklorists. Looking at books and articles serves two purposes. The writings not only provide models for what the students will do, they also legitimize the study of folklore.

A fine book to start with comes from England. It is *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* by Iona and Peter Opie. The Opies' work is unusual—scholarly work that is also successful and popular. (It does have one major oversight. It glosses over scatological and erotic lore.) The Opies' presentation of British children's lore includes many examples of the closely related American lore. The reader not only enjoys a well-written book, but also gets a good feel for the variety and volume of children's lore. The Opies also do a commendable job tracing the historical roots of children's lore. Another useful collection that also offers some analysis is Herbert and Mary Knapp's *One Potato, Two Potato... The Folklore of American Children*.

These two books can be sources for students in search of variations on the folklore they are studying. Raymond, a black student, was concentrating on the children's legend, "Johnny I want my eyes back," a "scary" tale that had delighted him as a child. In Raymond's version, Johnny's mother sends him to the store to buy some black-eyed peas. But Johnny, a bad boy, spends the money on candy. On the way home he cuts through a cemetery, pokes out the eyes of several corpses, and presents these to his mother instead of the peas. That evening the corpses rise up from their graves in search of their eyes. Ever so slowly they walk down the road, turn up the path to Johnny's house, mount the stairs, and enter Johnny's bedroom, chanting, "Johnny I want my eyes back, Johnny I want my eyes back." In *One Potato, Two Potato...*, Raymond found a version where the liver is stolen from the corpse. (See also "Gotcha" by Sylvia Grider in "Children's Folklore" Issue of *Center for Southern Folklore*, 1980, Vol. 3, p. 12.) Raymond and his classmates were amused by the Afro-American twist to the legend—the black-eyed peas (they didn't mention the pun). Assuming that the legend was known only to them, they were further surprised to find that it is a modern variant of a traditional folktale, "The Man from the Gallows." In the traditional tale a man steals the heart or liver or stomach from a person who has been hanged and takes it to his wife to eat. Later the ghost arrives to claim his stolen part and carries the man off. There is little doubt that these are related stories.

The books by the Opies and the Knapps are essentially collections. These are useful, but students need to see analytical studies as well. Sometimes I have students read articles, sometimes I give a lecture on several articles so students can see how different folklorists approach the same subject. The telephone prank, a widespread and continuously popular folklore, is a good subject for this.

In my lecture, I begin with Norine Dresser's article "Telephone Pranks," from the *New York Folklore Quarterly*, which is a good model study for students. She shows that the most popular telephone pranks serve the social needs of "making positive social contacts [and]... releasing hostility and frustration with a minimum risk of retaliation."

Dresser first discusses nonhostile pranks, the pranks that allow for positive social contacts. Some are played on peers. Boys and girls, for example, call someone they know, usually someone of the opposite sex, giggle, and then hang up. Some are played on adults, for example the prank of calling a number at random, asking for Grandfather and singing "Happy Birthday" to him. Most of the calls Dresser discusses, however, are hostile and directed against adults.

Dresser discusses two-victim calls, telephone company calls, obscene calls, phony contest winner calls, the formulaic call, and survey calls. Of the two-victim calls, the best known is the Pizza call—calling and ordering several pizzas, often for a neighbor. In one version of the telephone company call, the callers identify themselves as telephone repairmen working on the line. They ask the person not to answer the phone for the next half hour because, they explain, it would be dangerous for the repairman. Then they ring the number over and over until out of desperation the victim answers. At this point the callers let out bloodcurdling screams, pretending they are being executed. Phony contest winner and survey calls are parodies of the real thing. The formulaic calls are the best known, such as the classics:

"Do you have Prince Albert in the can?"
"Yes."
"Well, let him out."

As to the source of the hostility behind telephone pranks, Dresser writes:

> The best possible explanation would appear to be linked with the age of these callers (11-15). They are at the onset of adolescence, when the first stirrings of rebellion against adult rules are beginning.

The anonymity of the phone call, Dresser observes, is essential. The victim is unknown. "The protection of anonymity," Dresser explains, "provides a very safe method for releasing hostility or frustration and with little fear of retaliation."

Dresser concludes:

> It would appear then that the telephone pranks serve a very important social need for the adolescent, and are a valuable means for expressing and communicating his ideas and his conflicts.

At first the students are incredulous; a folklorist has studied telephone pranks, their clandestine activity, and is condoning, even praising them. This is a good moment for students to write a learning log entry on their opinions of telephone pranks. Are they a valuable means for expressing ideas and conflicts? Or what are they?

Students agree with much of Dresser's work, but they have some questions. In a footnote, Dresser suggests that telephone pranking does not begin in earnest until eighth grade. Dresser's article was published in 1973. Students now report starting earlier, as early as fourth grade.

Dresser suggests that students with better language skills tend to make up their own pranks and vary the traditional pranks. The students liked this idea and began to vie with one another for the best invented prank. Maria told us that when she was very little, she and her friends called the operator and pretended they were being robbed. Within minutes they heard police sirens. Before the police arrived at the door, Maria and her friends were escaping over the back fence.

To demonstrate that there are different ways to tackle the same subject, I also tell the students about Marilyn Jorgensen's article, "A Social-Interactional Analysis of Phone Pranks" in *Western Folklore*. It focuses on the types of dialogue used and the formal features of that dialogue, such as rhymes, alliteration, polysemy (words with multiple meanings), and puns. Jorgensen contends that one reason for the continued popularity of telephone pranks is the verbal play prominent in the pranks.

There are, for instance, the formulaic parodies of the way businesses answer the telephone. She mentions:

Morgan's Morgue—
You stab 'em, we slab 'em.

Jorgensen points out the alliteration and rhyme.

Pranks that depend on double meanings of words are also continually popular, such as calling a market and asking:

"Do you have chicken legs?"
"Yes."
"Well, wear long pants and they won't show."

To show yet another perspective and to emphasize disagreement about interpretation among folklorists, I also mention Trudier Harris's "Telephone Pranks: A Thriving Pastime" in the *Journal of Popular Culture*. She notes that the pranks are as old as the telephone. Her focus is different; she categorizes the pranks according to commercial and residential calls. And she disagrees with Dresser, maintaining that the purpose "is always the same—make an idiot of the person on the receiving end of the prank. . . ." She adds another point of interpretation; an important appeal of the pranks is that the callers enjoy the power they have over the anonymous adult on the other end.

All three—Dresser, Harris and Jorgensen—identified the genre, collected versions, and then analyzed their data. Dresser focused on the functions of the jokes, Jorgensen looked more at verbal play, and Harris at the longevity of the pranks. They were all trying to figure out why children play telephone pranks.

I finish by telling the students that they will all have something not found in the works of the scholars—their first-person narrative accounts of the folklore. Furthermore, I point out that no analysis is ever final. They can always ask new questions, bring in new information, and make new analyses. Already they can see some gaps in these studies. There is no mention of the ethnicity of the players, and no attempt to see if there are any male/female differences in the types of pranks played. Each writer seems to assume all American children play the same pranks the same way.

I want my students to come away from reading the articles and hearing the lecture knowing the three steps: identifying the folklore, collecting data, and analyzing it; knowing that there is more than one way to look at the material; and trusting their own experience.

Day Seven: Student Analysis of Children's Folklore

Once the students have chosen their topics, written their memories of the topic, and done several interviews, they are ready for analysis. As a prewriting activity for analysis, students sometimes exchange their memory papers. At the end of the papers, the readers write down their impressions of the functions of the folklore. For example, Trisha had written of playing Hide and Seek. Jennifer read her paper and wrote this note:

> Hide and Seek has the functions of entertaining the people who are playing it and it could be that it teaches you to hide from something bad or scary, because if you are hidden it can't find you, and if it can't find you, it can't hurt you. It also teaches kids to cooperate because they have to decide on certain rules. It's a game of strategy because you have to figure out where to hide and if there's a base, how to get back.

Jeff wrote about Capture the Flag, which he and his friend had called War. Twenty boys were divided into two groups. Each team had a flag. The object was to capture the opposing team's flag without getting "killed." Jon read his paper and wrote back:

> War was played to teach you to be patriotic and proud. It helped bring out the male dominance role that is programmed in society.

Sissie wrote of playing a neighborhood game of softball and got this note:

> Sometimes when friends get together, just sitting around talking can be uncomfortable. Finding a favorite game that everyone likes can bring you closer together so you really have a great time.

Another prewriting activity is partner or small group talk. After hearing a paper, the students can offer their answers to questions such as "What did you learn playing the game which is still important?" and "What was important about the game just at the time you were playing?"

Next the students write a draft of the analysis, giving their ideas on why the folklore they are studying stays alive in oral tradition. Here some use the ideas of their classmates, others do not. This draft can be started in class or done as homework, and then read to others for a response.

Last Days: Writing the Final Paper

The final papers in this unit vary. Students without much writing experience can successfully complete the unit with three separate pieces of writing: the childhood memory, the interviews, and the analysis. More skilled writers can write a single paper that includes their memory, describes the folklore, and analyzes it.

At the end of the school year in this class, we published a booklet of the students' writings. Most of the students had never seen their written words in print before. Within a given class, especially a heterogeneously grouped class, there is a wide spectrum of final products. William, one of the least skilled students, chose to include his essay on playing Doctor. He rewrote it five times before it was ready. William opened with the sentence, "The game Doctor reveals all closed doors." He went on to describe how he remembered playing:

> First I pretended to examine her reflexes. I hit her knee. I grabbed her hand and touched her breast and looked in her eyes and said, "They're okay," and checked her lips and kissed them, and said, "They're okay," and giggled a little.

William was proud of his writing, and the class loved it. They joked about their own memories of Doctor playing days.

The next piece was written by Pam, a senior and a very capable young woman who was a truant with little interest in school. In folklore class, however, she turned out to be a fluent writer. Her children's folklore paper was on jump rope:

> Jump rope has been around forever. I played it, my mother played it, her mother and her mother played it. When I was little about 12 girls played jump rope with us. The more we had, the more fun it was. The only thing I hated was when my socks fell down. The way we played was two people held the ends. Whoever got out had to hold the rope and the previous rope holder got in line. You could jump with one or more persons if you wanted, but whoever got out, held the rope. We didn't have steady-enders, because everyone wanted to play. What I loved the most was when it was time out for Kool Aid. We always had plenty and even today I still drink it every day.
>
> I didn't know that the game was originally a boy's game [this information was in one of the readings]. When we played, boys always teased, or grabbed the rope and made us miss. They would jump in and jump out and laugh and tease us about our songs.
>
> You can learn from jump rope too. We learned how to get along and take turns. We learned rhythm. We jumped to music, singing and sometimes to our own humming.

In Pam's paper, her classmates especially liked the details of her socks falling down, the memory of "steady-enders," and the description of the boys disrupting the game. They liked her interpretation that in playing jump rope the girls were learning to cooperate. They also liked the mention of rhythm in the game. Afro-American musical patterns were an important part of their childhood play, a part they delight in recalling and reenacting.

Ava, who had been playing telephone pranks for years, wrote a fine paper about her own pranks and about new pranks she learned while interviewing friends and family.

Studying her data, Ava noticed something not mentioned in the literature. At different ages she had played different pranks. From her experience she traces the developmental stages of the telephone prankster. Beginning with the early stages, Ava wrote:

> First came the sort of "starter" pranks—ordering flowers and food (Chinese and pizza). . . .another early prank was calling to say "hello" or just to bother somebody. . . .My version of this was to call and try to chat at two o'clock in the morning.

These were followed by more complicated pranks, such as those that require a series, usually four calls:

> (1.) "Is Lisa there?"
> "No."
> (2.) "Is Lisa there?"
> "No."
> (3.) "Is Lisa there?"
> "No."
> (4.) "Hello, this is Lisa, have there been any calls for me?"

Ava went on to desribe the scatological and sexual pranks she and her interviewees graduated to when they got older. This survey call is typical:

> "Hello, I'm calling from a local market whose name cannot be revealed to you, but we would appreciate it if you took part in our survey. How often do you shop?"
> "Three times a week."
> "What is the average total of your bill?"
> "Thirty dollars."
> "What brand of peanut butter do you buy?"
> "Jiffy."
> "How long does it take you to reach orgasm??!!"

In her article, Dresser mentions that the primary audience is the friends watching the caller, not the person being called. Ava agreed, but she made some interesting additional observations. As she got older, she got more interested in the

reaction of the person called. When she was younger (she played from age 7 to 14), she hung up immediately. But as she got older, she waited and engaged people in longer conversations.

Ava emphasized power. She felt the power the telephone gives kids over the adults at the other end of the line is key to understanding the appeal of the pranks. Ava also mentioned the historical changes in the playing of telephone pranks that she had noticed in her research:

> To my parents' (or perhaps grandparents') generation, the form of the prank was much different. Instead of calling to say something, they listened in on the party line, only occasionally saying something to bewilder the other people.

She concluded with the observation that the emphasis placed on sex by today's popular culture is reflected in the game. Telephone pranks by students her age (15) are mostly about sex. Finally, she predicts that telephone pranks are here to stay unless "video phones" come in.

William's, Pam's, and Ava's papers came from the same class. William and Pam, who had limited writing experience, depended more on their narratives. Ava, who had a better writing background, incorporated her experience into a paper that focused on the analysis of the folklore.

This unit in children's folklore takes roughly two weeks. The students write a narrative, conduct interviews, and write an analytical essay. The content comes from their personal histories. Studying their memories as part of American folklore, the students transform these memories into studies of American culture.

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Who Wrote This

by Anselm Hollo

being a poet these days is a little like
playing the harmonica
—John Chamberlain

when we were little poets
we told ourselves
one day
we'll have a big book
just like the big poets

& now
we have big books
but are we big poets now
don't make me laugh ha ha

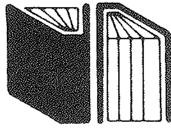
though even Charles Olson
has not been the same
since the academics ate him

o I do not wish to remember
have trouble recalling
find it hard to believe

what a day it was
flags were flying
bands were playing
& all the lovely ladies
had flowers in their hair

(& that was first written
by Munro Leaf
author of *Ferdinand the Bull*
a great poem)

ANSELM HOLLO is a Finnish poet, translator, and teacher who has lived in America for many years. Among his books of poetry are *Soujourner Microcosms* and *Finite Continued*, both published by Coffee House Press. Currently he teaches at the University of Utah.

BOOKS 

1968: A Student Generation in Revolt
Ronald Fraser, editor
(New York: Pantheon, 1988)
$24.95 hardcover, $14.95 paperback

by Cynthia Stokes Brown

1968 BELONGS TO AN EXCITING NEW GENRE, that of international oral history. A comparative study of student movements in six capitalist North Atlantic rim nations, it is told in the voices of those directly involved in the rebellion, activists from the United States, West Germany, France, Italy, Britain, and Northern Ireland. More than 230 participants shared their memories, chiefly during 1984 and 1985, with the authors of this book.

The general editor of *1968,* Ronald Fraser, is a writer with three previous oral histories to his credit. He currently lives in London. To create this book, he interviewed former student activists in England and Northern Ireland and collaborated with six historians and two sociologists who interviewed in the four other countries. The two U.S. collaborators were Bret Eynon, historian on the staff of the American Social History Project at CCNY, and Ronald Grele, director of the Columbia Oral History Research Office and president of the Oral History Association.

Though the perspective of oral history is always from the inside, its style varies enormously. When journalists do it, it usually comes out as long excerpts in the voice of the narrators, with a minimum of historical context added by the author, as in Studs Terkel's *Hard Times* or Howell Raines' *My Soul Is Rested.*

When historians write oral history, as they have in *1968,* the proportion of direct quotation tends to diminish. Historians like to provide narrative and analysis, based on their understanding of the interviews. Quotations from those interviewed are used to illustrate and confirm the text. Since the quotations seldom constitute more than part of a paragraph, they become part of a continuous narrative. The result is not so engaging and readable as journalists' oral history, but it is a more serious attempt to analyze what happened and why.

This book was first published in Great Britain. This U.S. edition contains 38 additional pages devoted to American history, primarily the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the counterculture. The eight writers did not feel that this material was necessary for the comparative purposes they had in mind, but the publisher judged it necessary for marketing the book to a U.S. audience.

So what happened in 1968 to justify the title of this book? The authors of *1968* see the apogee of the student movement in the May '68 general strike in France, in which students, joined by workers, nearly toppled De Gaulle's government and the established order. The deadlocked '50s had been broken apart by the civil rights movement, followed by the counterculture, the free speech movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement,and the organization of the SDS in the U.S. (Students for a Democratic Society) and in Germany (Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund). By May '68 it seemed that students had succeeded in creating a New Left International, a political position between Stalinism and social democratic reformism that crossed many national boundaries.

But within months the established order reasserted itself. In June, De Gaulle won a massive victory in the French general elections; in August, the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia, and the U.S. Democrats failed to nominate an anti-war candidate, with police attacking protesters at the convention. Within two more years the student movement had run its course, halted by the counteroffensive from the established order, internal disagreements and changing leadership, and, during the '70s, the worldwide economic depression.

The student movement failed to bring about large-scale social transformation. It did not provide a consistent theoretical synthesis or any plausible strategy for making the transition from capitalist democracy to socialist democracy, tall orders for the young and inexperienced.

But students did accomplish much, *1968* insists. They transformed paternalistic conditions on college and university campuses. They played a major role in achieving civil rights and in stopping the Vietnam War. Their movement, with its male chauvinism revealed, spawned the gay and women's movements of the '70s. They demonstrated that any social transformation must offer more freedom to everyone and must be democratic in organization. The authors conclude with a sad but hopeful postscript, noting that the people who created 1968 are now at the height of their careers and influence, mostly in teaching and media work.

This is fascinating for those who took part in it and for young people seeking to understand the accomplishments and failures of students in the last generation. The comparative approach, of weaving together the events in six different countries, goes a long way toward revealing the bigger picture, raising important questions, and demonstrating how to think trans-nationally, if not quite globally.

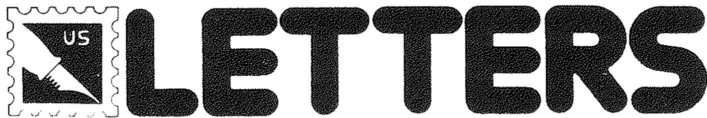
It is a disappointment that the study is limited to six Atlantic rim countries, especially after the editor acknowledges that it was Japanese students who led the way. By the late '50s, Zengakuren (the All-Japan Federation of Student Self-Government Associations) was a militant left-wing and anti-imperialist organization seeking alliances with sectors of the

CYNTHIA STOKES BROWN is a teacher who won the 1986 American Book Award for her work in oral history. A selection from her new T&W book, *Like It Was: a Complete Guide to Writing Oral History,* appeared in the September-October issue of *Teachers & Writers* magazine.

working class. Why didn't Fraser go for the gold and make this book more nearly global by including at least Japan?

Fraser claims that this is "the first large-scale international oral history of its kind," as well as the first comparative study of student movements in the six countries. Presumably there simply was not enough groundwork already laid for him to be able to take the step of comparing student movements globally. Perhaps the network of trusted historians known to each other does not yet exist outside of nations with common cultures. I can only applaud *1968* as the first step in the right direction and trust that truly global oral histories will appear.

Teachers will find *1968* a highly useful volume to have on hand. It contains clear, succinct, objective accounts of "The Deadlocked Fifties," "Breaking the Deadlock" with the civil rights movement, "Berkeley and the Free Speech Movement," and "Vietnam: 1965-Spring 1967." Current students need this information in order to assess their own power and the ways they will choose to wield it. This book models a narrative form that students can use in incorporating oral interviews into their reports and term papers. Most important, it models the trans-national, comparative way of thinking that we all need to learn as fast as we can. ●



Dear T&W,

I wanted to tell you about the past few months in one of my workshops. In mid-February, when my students were getting tired of doing anything at all, I brought in the January-February 1988 issue of *Teachers & Writers*. We read the article "Poetry Ought to Be Made by Everyone." The teenagers—a group of bright, college-bound seniors—really liked the idea of trying to "see" into the psychic reality of another person. During the discussion, I stressed the power of one's unconscious to perceive the questions of another's unconscious. For a change, the group did not want to talk at length about the writing exercise, they wanted to get into it right away. So, they wrote. I wrote too, since writing surrealistic "Dialogues" calls for the kids to work in pairs and there was an odd number of kids. Just as Achille Chavée described in the article, we each wrote a series of five questions and answers. After each series of five, we read the questions and answers to each other to check how well we were "reading" one another and then began a new series. We were surprised by how some of the questions and answers worked so well. For example:

> Why is morality a one-way street?
> Because when you walk on the beach the waves wash your footprints away.
>
> Why did you learn to tie a shoe lace?
> Because I don't like spiders.
>
> If the finger that bore the garlands of silvered love and commitment were chopped off
> Then there would be life but no color, you must strike discord, you must see red!
>
> If your teeth were seeds growing
> you would have to abandon your past and no longer recognize your face in the mirror of my face.

Some "Dialogues" didn't work at all and my students attempted to understand why. They supposed that these didn't work because some people were "givers." "Givers" are able only to send, but not receive unconscious energy. Another thing they noticed was that the more simple the questions and answers the more likely they would connect and make sense.

Next week's workshop came around and I thought that they might take the dialogues and fashion poems out of them, just as Chavée had done. However, the group had a different idea. They wanted to repeat the exercise. The dialogues improved dramatically. During the course of writing and reading the dialogues, they again realized that the more simply they wrote, the better the dialogue. I think the following excerpts show their growth from one week to the next:

> Why are you wearing the same shoes as me?
> Because the sun is just too damn hot.
>
> Why are you looking at me that way?
> Because the truth will set you free.
>
> Why did Z decide to be last?
> Because people have different tastes.
>
> Why is the pavement in patches?
> Because everybody wants some.
>
> Why do I get the blues on a day when the sun is shaded by a cloud with no imagination?
> Because all problems cannot be solved easily.
>
> If the eyes of the corpse gleam a brilliant red
> Then dogs would smile.
>
> If all zippers got stuck
> Then the moon would blow up.
>
> If boys never learned how to talk to girls
> Then the earth could fall out of its orbit.
>
> If wishes were horses
> Then everyone dances.
>
> When love fell down a flight of stairs
> The fish left the sea.