The Girl Who Married the Bear

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Introduction by Catharine McClellan

I first heard the wonderful story of "The Girl Who Married the Bear" in 1948 when, as a graduate student in anthropology, I was doing my initial fieldwork with Tagish Indians of Carcross in southern Yukon, Canada. Maria Johns, aged and blind, volunteered the tale as a going-away present for me, telling it in Tlingit, which was the language spoken by most Tagish in the late nineteenth century. After every few sentences her daughter, Dora Austin Wedge, translated her words into excellent English. The only other person present was Dora's nine-year-old daughter, Annie, and we listened, entranced, as the tale unfolded. The narration was superb.

Maria offered the story to explain why people do not eat the meat of grizzly bears and to account for the origin of the ritual for the proper disposal of the body of a slain bear. As she described it, the ritual seemed to be part of what anthropologists identify as a circumpolar complex of bear ceremonialism, but so far it had not been reported for this part of the Subarctic. Here was something new I could add to scholarly literature. Could a novice ethnographer ask for more?

In my subsequent Yukon fieldwork I did not specifically plan to collect oral narratives, but I soon discovered that the Indians considered telling stories to be one of their most vital ways of expressing their identities and teaching their most deeply held values to their children or to an outsider like me. Despite major changes in their culture, Native narrators and their audiences still find their oral traditions relevant in the literate world. Over the years many more stories filled my notebooks, and I heard about the girl who married the bear eleven more times. Nine of the narrators volunteered it as Maria had done, five of them choosing it as their first selection; I specifically requested it only twice.

Since at first I naïvely judged the story's chief value to be that of extending the known distribution of bear ceremonialism, I paid relatively little

attention to other aspects of it. Only later did I ask, Why its great popularity? Why did men and women of all ages so often choose to tell it? Actually Maria and Dora had already revealed the reason, which is simply that it is a marvelous piece of creative narrative. Indeed, because Maria was such a gifted raconteur and Dora such a fine translator, their skills had easily carried me across language differences, lifting the tale into a realm well beyond that encompassing all my earlier ideas of folklore. Even though at the time I knew little of the tale's cultural context, I could not fail to sense the tremendous psychological and sociological conflicts in the plot, and I began to glimpse the true depths of the stories I was hearing. Ultimately I came to understand that this particular story grips Yukon Natives with all the power of a major literary work, evoking in them the same kind of intense responses as those experienced by Greeks hearing their great Attic dramas. That is why I called the story a masterpiece of oral tradition when I finally published it in 1970 and why I continue to think it is such. It speaks, of course, most forcibly to those most aware of its cultural context, but its messages are fundamental enough to have reached beyond the world of northern Natives to be recontextualized in various ways by others of non-Indian heritage.

Until recently Western scholars of literature rarely have rated the stylistic qualities of oral narrative even by their own standards or paid much attention to linguistic and other criteria by which nonliterate people themselves evaluate their oral traditions. Yukon Natives do not often comment on such matters either. I believe that the gross structural arrangement of a story can remain in the same translation, but to appreciate finer stylistic points, one needs the text in the original language. Lost forever is whatever linguistic magic may have been in Maria's original telling, the subtle imagery conveyed by her choice of words, and other ineffable qualities of language. Tape recorders were not then widely available, and to have asked Maria to wait while I laboriously wrote her Tlingit phrasing would have been to destroy her gift to me. I took down only Dora's translation and added explanatory comments. She spoke slowly for my benefit, but even so I probably missed a few phrases. Nor could I catch Maria's rendition of the two songs so integral to the tale. Dora did not translate them, so I have substituted two texts from a version of the story told to me in 1951 by Tommy Peters, an Inland Tlingit of Yukon.[1]

Of course, oral societies do not value well-wrought language alone; performance also counts. Sadly lacking in my printed English version of this story are Maria's and Dora's pacing of utterances, their pauses and emphases, the changing loudness and softness of their voices, Maria's imitations

of a growling bear and barking dogs. My written record of Maria's accompanying gestures as she told the story scarcely conveys the unsettling impact produced each time she passed her hand slowly across her face to indicate whether the bear appeared at that moment in his human guise or in his bear guise. Nor does it capture the effect of impending disaster Maria somehow imparted by stirring about in bed under her gopher-skin blanket and knocking on the dresser beside her at the point when the girl and her bear husband first hear her oncoming brothers and their dogs.

Yet style and performance alone do not guarantee an oral masterpiece. Every great narrative must have compelling substance as well, and I believe it is the content of "The Girl Who Married the Bear" that so powerfully and consistently attracts Yukon Natives and others. I would argue too that the more that is known of a story's cultural context the greater the appreciation of the tale. Certainly as my own knowledge of Yukon Native culture has deepened, so too has my awareness of the multilayered symbolism embedded in this story. For example—though I do not develop it here—at a deep level the story may be an account of a failed shamanistic quest, illuminating just when in their life cycles females are able to absorb certain kinds of strong spiritual power. Dora's daughter, Annie, has doubtless discovered new meanings, too.

The overt plot holds considerable suspense, but adult Natives all know its outcome well. The reason the story continues to grip them so forcibly, I think, lies in the dreadful choice of loyalties to others that its characters have to make and in its pervasive underscoring of the delicate and awful balance in relationships between humans and animals that Indians believe has existed since the world began. The basic concerns of everybody in the society are rendered relentlessly vivid by the tale's concentration on the actions of only a few individuals.

What of the cultural context? Southern Yukon Indians of either sex trace their consanguineous ties only through females; it is through them that one's kin group is formed. In every family also the wife and children belong to one matrilineal kin group, but the husband belongs to a different one. This is because the whole society is divided into two distinct sides, or moieties, designated as Crow or Wolf. One always belongs to the moiety of one's mother but always must marry a person of the father's moiety. Membership in the moiety also obligates one to dispose of the corpses of those in the opposite moiety, with suitable rituals.

Another crucial aspect of the social system is cross-sex sibling avoidance. After puberty, brothers and sisters should neither talk to nor look at one

another directly, though in a crisis a younger brother or sister may speak circumspectly to an older sister or brother. One of Maria's most traumatic experiences occurred right after her puberty seclusion, when she had to find her older brother on his winter trapline and ask for help because the family was starving. Following the encounter, she hid and wept for several days. Yet in spite of avoidance rules, strong sibling unity lies at the heart of the society. The oldest brother looks after the welfare of his younger siblings, who ideally never question his actions, and brothers and sisters aid one another with food and clothing throughout their lives. The brother-in-law tie is equally important, for brothers-in-law link those of opposite moieties. Only the best fellowship should prevail between those who address each other as brother-in-law.

A Native can always find a sibling or sibling-in-law in Yukon, for anyone of one's own age within one's own moiety may be counted as a brother or sister, depending on sex, whether or not truly related by blood, and anyone of one's own age in the opposite moiety may be classed as a sibling-in-law. Furthermore, the system includes animals as well as humans. I have seen a Crow man address a pack of wolves as brothers-in-law, and the term is equally appropriate for a bear.

Long ago animal people even looked like humans, until they pulled up their animal masks after Crow, the transformer, opened the box of daylight on them. Now, except in rare instances, they appear to humans only in animal guise. Yet most animals have greater spiritual power than humans, and they may use it for good or ill. A major philosophical and practical problem for humans is how to live harmoniously with animals that they continually confront and often have to kill in order to stay alive. Indians observe many rituals designed to entice the potentially beneficial powers of animals and to ensure the reincarnation of their spirits so that humans may have food. One must never say or think anything offensive about an animal or treat it or its attributes, including its excrement and its corpse, disrespectfully. An offended animal is bound to exact revenge, often drawing the culprit to its own domain and making it difficult or impossible for him or her to return permanently to the human world. Those who have come back, however, report staying in places where time is distorted, where fires are not what they seem, and where many other phenomena are illusory to humans. Sojourners in animal worlds have also learned, as does the girl in this story, how animals wish their bodies to be treated after death.

Surely the reader who knows only these few facts can now grasp the drama of "The Girl Who Married the Bear" more fully than one ignorant of

its cultural context. As soon as she mocks the bear droppings, the girl is at risk. A handsome man appears, and in spite of her desire to go home, she enters a socially unarranged sexual alliance with him. Anguishing doubts and dilemmas ensue. She gradually learns that she is staying with a bear, and she betrays him by leaving signs of her presence near their den. But she also comes to love him, especially after her two children are born. Then she must decide whether to cleave to him or return to her human kin. She persuades the bear to give up his life to his brothers-in-law, but the supreme irony is that in the end she herself does the unthinkable deed of killing her mother and all her brothers but the youngest.[2] The very kinsmen who earlier have so carefully prepared her and her cub children for a brief stay in the human world and who should have continued as her protectors become her tormentors. Their irresponsible insistence that she and her children don bear hides seals the fates of them all. Every rule of sibling and affinal relationships and of human and animal relationships is violated. A young girl's careless defiance of a fundamental taboo has doomed her to join the animal world forever. How can the enormity of such events fail to shake the narrator and audience? They must realize that although he allowed himself to be killed, it was the bear-shaman husband who had the ultimate strength. So it is that grizzly bears today are held in reverence and are accorded funeral rites suitable for humans of the highest rank and power.

I believe Dora's translation of Maria's story is among the best of the Yukon versions available to English speakers today, but the existence of other versions invites comparisons. If well documented, they enable us to explore the influences that have shaped them: both the cultural context and the life circumstances of the individual narrators. For example, although this story has so far been recorded most often in Yukon and adjacent matrilineal areas, Robert Brightman has published two versions from the Woods Crees of northern Manitoba.[3] The Crees practice bear ceremonialism, but unlike Yukon Indians, they reckon kinship through both the mother's and the father's lines. Is this why some of the key interactions between the characters in their story contrast so markedly with those in versions from other matrilineal areas? The Crees say that the girl's father (not her brothers) hunts and kills the bear husband and that she is killed by the only brother to escape the massacre she and her sons wreak on an entire village. If we focus on personal history as a source of variation, we discover that more than any male narrator, Maria stresses the items of clothing that the girl wants for herself and her partly furred children as they prepare to reenter a world where clothes and human odors define human identity. She also

develops themes of romantic and maternal love, both of which were significant in her own life. Men elaborate other themes—the strained relationship between the bear and his brothers-in-law, the bear's ability to provide food for his wife, or the proper treatment of a grizzly's corpse. Do not such variations cogently reaffirm a need to understand both content and context if we are ever to fathom the essential components of this genuine masterpiece of oral literature?

NOTES

1. Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, in *Haa Shuká / Our Ancestors: Tlingit Oral Narratives*, vol. 1 of *Classics of Tlingit Oral Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), give Tommy Peters's 1972 and 1973 version of the story in Tlingit text, with a translation by Nora Dauenhauer, discussing further his two 1951 songs that I have incorporated. They also include a version by Frank Dick Sr. of Dry Bay, Alaska. Maria's version and ten others, including those by Tommy Peters and Jake Jackson (see note 2), appear in Catharine McClellan, *The Girl Who Married the Bear: A Masterpiece of Indian Oral Tradition*, National Museum of Man Publications in Ethnology no. 2 (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1970). Much of my introduction here is condensed from that publication. Additional Yukon versions are in Catharine McClellan et al., *Part of the Land, Part of the Water: A History of Yukon Indians* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1987). In some texts, including Maria and Dora's version, I have made some minor corrections in basic English.
2. Tommy Peters explained that only the girl's younger brother was ritually pure enough to be able to kill the bear. Maria did not say which brother did the killing, but another narrator, Jake Jackson, did. See McClellan, *Girl Who Married the Bear*.
3. Robert Brightman, *Ācaḏōhkīwina and Ācimōwina: Traditional Narratives of the Rock Cree Indians*, Canadian Ethnology Service, Mercury Series, Paper no. 113 (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1989).

The Girl Who Married the Bear

Once there was a little girl about as big as Annie. And she used to go pick berries in the summer. Every summer she would go with her family, and they would pick berries and dry them. When she used to go with her womenfolk on the trail, they would see bear droppings on the trail. In the old days girls had to be careful about bear droppings. They shouldn't walk over them. Men could walk over them, but young girls had to walk around them.

But this girl always did jump over them and kick them. She would disobey her mother. All the time she would see them and kick them and step over them. She kept seeing them all around her. She did this from childhood.

When she was quite big, they were going camping. They were going to dry fish. They went out picking berries. She was just a young girl. She went out and was picking with her mother and aunts and sisters. She saw some bear droppings. She said all kinds of words to them and kicked and jumped over them.

When they were all coming home, they were all carrying their baskets of berries. The girl saw some nice berries and stopped to get them. The others went ahead. When she had picked the berries and started to get up, her berries all spilled out of her basket. She leaned down and was picking them off the ground.

Soon she saw a young man. He was very good looking. She had never seen him before. He had red paint on his face. He stopped and talked to her.

He said, "Those berries you are picking are no good. They are full of dirt. Let's go up a little ways and fill your basket up. There are some good berries growing up there. I'll walk home with you. You needn't be afraid!"[1]

After they had got the basket half full of berries, the man said, "There is another bunch of berries up there a little ways. We'll pick them too."

When they had picked them all, he said, "It's time to eat. You must be hungry."

He made a fire. It looked just like a fire, but it was not a real one. They cooked gopher, quite a lot of it, and they ate some.[2]

Then the man said, "It's too late to go home now. We'll go home tomorrow. It's summer, and there's no need to fix a big camp."

So they stayed there.

When they went to bed, he said, "Don't lift your head in the morning and look at me even if you wake up before I do."

So they went to bed.

Next morning they woke up. The man said to her, "Well, we might as well go. We'll just eat that cold gopher. We needn't make a fire. Then we'll go pick some berries. Let's get a basketful."

All the time the girl kept talking about her mother and father. All the time she wanted to go home, and she kept talking about it.

He said, "Don't be afraid. I'm going home with you."

Then he slapped her right on the top of the head, and he put a circle around the girl's head the way the sun goes. He did this so she would forget. Then she forgot. She didn't talk about her home any more.

Then they left again. He said, "You're all right. I'll go home with you."

Then after this she forgot all about going home. She just went around with him, picking berries. Every time they camped, it seemed like a month to her, but it was really only a day. They started in May. They kept traveling and going.

Finally she recognized a place. It looked like a place where she and her family used to dry meat. Then he stopped there at the timberline and slapped her. He made a circle sunwise on her head and then another on the ground where she was sitting.

He said, "Wait here. I'm going hunting gophers. We have no meat. Wait until I come back!"

Then he came back with gophers. They kept traveling. Late in the evening they made a camp and cooked.

Next morning they got up again. At last she knew. They were traveling again, and it was getting near fall. It was getting late. And she came to her senses and knew it. It was cold.

He said, "It's time to make camp. We must make a home."

He started making a home. He was digging a den. She knew he was a bear then.

He got quite a ways digging a den. Then he said, "Go get some balsam boughs and brush."

Then she went and got some. She broke branches from as high as she could. She brought the bundle.

He said, "That brush is not good! You left a mark, and people will see it and know we are here. We can't use that! We can't stay here!"

So they left. They went up to the head of a valley. She knew her brothers used to go there to hunt and eat bear. In the springtime they took the dogs there, and they hunted bears in April. They would send the dogs into the bear den long ago, and the bear would come out. That's where her brothers used to go. She knew it.

He said, "We'll make camp."

He dug a den and sent her out again. "Get some brush that is just lying on the ground—not from up high. No one will see where you get it, and it will be covered with snow."

She got it from the ground and brought it to him, but she bent the branches up high too. She let them hang down so her brothers would know. And she rubbed sand all over herself, all over her body and limbs. And then she rubbed the trees all around so the dogs would find where she had left her scent. Then she went to the den with her bundle of brush. She brought it.

Just when the man was digging, he looked like a bear. That was the *only* time. The rest of the time he seemed like a human being. The girl didn't know how else to stay alive, so she stayed with him as long as he was good to her.

"This is better," he said when she brought back the brush. Then he brushed up and fixed the place. After he fixed the den, they left.

They went hunting gophers for winter. She never saw him do it. She always sat around while he was hunting gophers. He dug them up like a grizzly bear, and he didn't want her to see it. He never showed her where he kept the gophers.

Nearly every day they hunted gophers and picked berries. It was quite late in the year. He was just like a human to her.

It was October. It was really late in the fall. He said, "Well, I guess we'll go home now. We have enough food and berries. We'll go down."

So they went home. Really they went into the den. They stayed there and slept. They woke up once a month and got up to eat. They kept doing it and going back to bed. Each month it seemed like another morning, just like another day. They never really went outside; it just seemed like it.

Soon the girl found that she was carrying a baby. She had two little babies. One was a girl and one was a boy. She had them in February in the den. That is when bears have their cubs. She had hers then.

The bear used to sing in the night. When she woke up, she would hear him:

I dreamed about it;
that they were going after me.

The bear became like a doctor when he started living with a woman. It just came upon him like a doctor.[3]

I dreamed about it;
that they were going after me.

He sang the song twice. She heard it the first time. The second time, the bear made a sound, "*Woof! Woof!*" And she woke up.

"You're my wife, and I am going to leave soon. It looks like your brothers are going to come up here soon, before the snow is gone. I want you to know that I am going to do something bad. I am going to fight back!"

"Don't do that!" she said. "They are my brothers! If you really love me, don't fight! You have treated me good. Why did you live with me if you are going to kill them?"

"Well, all right," he said; "I won't fight, but I want you to know what will happen!"

His canines looked like swards to her. "These are what I fight with," he said. They looked like knives to her.

She kept pleading, "Don't do anything! I'll still have my children if they kill you!"

She knew he was a bear then. She really knew.

They went to sleep. She woke again. He was singing again.

I went through every one of those young people,
and the last brother—I know he did the right thing.

"It's true," he said. "They are coming close. If they kill me, I want them to give you my skull—my head—and my tail. Tell them to give them to you. Wherever they kill me, build a big fire and burn my head and tail. And sing this song while the head is burning. Sing it until they are all burned up:

I went through every one of those young people,
and the last brother—I know he did the right thing."

So they ate and went to bed, and another month went by. They didn't sleep the whole month. They kept waking up.

"It's coming close," he said. "I can't sleep good. It's getting to be bare ground. Look out and see if the snow has melted in front of the den."

She looked, and there was mud and sand. She grabbed some and made it all into a ball and rubbed it all over herself. It was full of her scent. She rolled it down the hill. The dogs could smell it.

She came in and said, "There's bare ground all over in some places."

He asked her why she had made the marks: "Why? Why? Why? Why? They'll find us easy!"

After they had slept for half a month, they woke, and he was singing again.

"This is the last one," he said. "You'll not hear me again. Any time, the dogs are coming to the door. They are close. Well, I'll fight back. I'm going to do something bad!"

His wife said, "You know they are my brothers! Don't do it! Who will look after my children if you kill them? You must think of the kids. My brothers will help me. If my brothers hurt you, let them be!"

They went to bed for just a little while. "I can't sleep good, but we'll try," he said.

Next morning he said, "Well, it's close! It's close! Wake up!"

Just when they were waking up, they heard a noise. The dogs were barking. "Well," he said, "I'll leave. Where are my knives? I want them!"

He took them down. She saw him putting in his teeth. He was a big bear.

She pleaded with him: "Please don't fight! If you wanted me, why did you go this far? Just think of the kids. Don't hurt my brothers!"

When he went, he shook her hand and said, "You are not going to see me again!"

He went out and growled. He slapped something back into the den. It was a pet dog, a little bear dog,[4] and also a pair of gloves.

When he threw the dog in, she grabbed it and shoved it back in the brush under the nest. She put the dog there to hide it. She sat on it and kept it there so it couldn't get out. She wanted to keep it for a reason.

For a long time there was no noise. She went out of the den. She heard her brothers below. They had already killed the bear. She felt bad, and she sat down.

She found an arrow and one side of a glove. She picked it up and all of the arrows. Finally she fitted the little dog with the strings around his back. She tied the arrows and the glove into a bundle. She put them on the little dog, and he ran to his masters.

The boys were down there dressing the bear. They knew the dog. They noticed the bundle and took it off.

"It's funny," they said. "Nobody in a bear den would tie this on."

They talked about it. They decided to send the youngest brother up to the den. In those days a younger brother could talk to his sister, but an older brother couldn't.

The older brothers said to the youngest brother, "We lost our sister a year ago in May. Something could have happened. A bear might have taken her away. You are the youngest brother. Don't be afraid. There is nothing up there but her. You go and see if she is there. Find out."

He went.

She was sitting there crying. The boy came up. She was sitting and crying. She cried when she saw him.

She said, "You boys killed your brother-in-law! I went with him last May. You killed him! But tell the others to save me the skull and the tail. Leave it there for me. When you go home, tell Mother to sew a dress for me so I can go home. Sew a dress for the girl and pants and a shirt for the boy. And moccasins. And tell her to come see me."

He left and got down there and told his brothers, "This is my sister up there. She wants the head and the tail."

They did this, and they went home. They told their mother. She got busy and sewed. She had a dress and moccasins and clothes for the children.

The next day she went up there. She came to the place. They dressed the little kids. Then they went down to where the bear was killed. The boys had left a big fire. The girl burned the head and tail. Then she sang till all was ashes.

They went home, but she didn't go right home.

She said, "Get the boys to build a house. I can't come right into the main camp. It will be quite a while. The boys can build a camp right away."

She stayed there a long while. Toward fall she came and stayed wither mother all winter. The kids grew.

Next spring her brothers wanted her to act like a bear. They wanted to play with her. They had killed a female bear that had cubs, one male and one female. They wanted the sister to put on the hide and act like a bear. They fixed little arrows. They pestered her to play with them, and they wanted her two little children to play too.

She didn't want it. She told her mother, "I can't do it! Once I do it, I will turn into a bear! I'm half there already. Hair is already showing on my arms and legs. It is quite long!"

If she had stayed there with her bear husband, she would have turned into a bear. "If I put on a bear hide, I'll turn into one," she said.

They kept telling her to play. Then the boys sneaked up. They threw hides over her and the little ones.

Then she walked off on four legs, and she shook herself just like a bear. It just happened. She was a grizzly bear.

She couldn't do a thing. She had to fight the arrows. She killed them all off, even her mother. But she didn't kill her youngest brother, not him. She couldn't help it. Tears were running down her face.

Then she went on her own. She had her two little cubs with her.

That's why they claim long ago that a bear is partly human. That's why you never eat grizzly bear meat. Now people eat black bear meat, but they still don't eat grizzly meat, because grizzlies are half human.

NOTES

1. **Here Dora stopped to explain:** "He was really a bear, only she didn't know it yet. This is a really old story from way back when there were only a few people. It's true." I do not think that Maria put this into her account; it would have seemed unnecessary.

2. **Gopher:** the local English term for the ground squirrel that grizzlies dig up in quantity in late summer.
3. **Doctor:** an Indian doctor, or shaman; someone who can see what is going to happen and use his or her spiritual powers to prevent it.
4. **Bear dog:** Southern Yukon Indians kept a special breed of small dogs, Tahltan dogs, to hunt bears.