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**STORIES – A POWERFUL TOOL IN TRIBAL LITERATURE, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE  
TO *HOW MARTEN GOT HIS SPOTS: AND OTHER KOOTENAI INDIAN STORIES***

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**ABSTRACT**

Since time immemorial, stories hold prime place in the process of individuation. The art of storytelling is as old as human civilization. And the world of Tribe is of no exception. Many of the rural and tribal societies are oral in nature. Their history is not written but orally transmitted from one generation to another, in the form of poetry, songs, proverbs, stories, narrative dances and various rituals. Their historical and cultural information are passed on through some of these means. Primarily they used stories for imparting knowledge and courage to the budding generation. Among the array of tribes across the world, the *Kootenai* people – a particular sect of tribe - today exist in south-eastern British Columbia, Washington State, Idaho and Montana. For centuries, *Kootenai* children and adults gathered on cold, dark winter nights to listen and learn from stories. Recorded by their elders and illustrated by *Kootenai* artists from the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana, these *Kootenai* stories are originally intended to educate young tribal members about their history and culture. The collection of *How Marten Got His Spots: and other Kootenai stories* packed with morals, in which Marten learns a hard lesson in obedience; *Coyote and Trout*, in which Coyote learns the consequences of greed; *Little Weasel's Dream*, in which the child Little Weasel learns the importance of listening to his elders; and *Tepee Making*, an illustrated lesson in construction. The main focal point of the present paper is to exhibit, how by employing the technique of storytelling, these tribes can communicate and mould their rising generation, with special reference to *How Marten Got His Spots: and other Kootenai stories*.

**Introduction**

Orality and literature are closely inter-twined with each other. They have been adroitly fabricated with a fine tapestry of 'Stories'. A story fascinates and enthralls the mind of the listen-

er. It occupies a prominent province in the territory of Literature. Since time immemorial, stories seize leading place in the process of individuation. They have been shared in every culture as a means of entertainment, education, cultural preservation and to insist on moral values.

For a number of centuries, stories have been verbalised. They have been preserved in the memory of the people till written versions emerged. In oral traditions, stories are kept alive by being retold again and again. They are based on ethics, passed down by older generations to the younger, to shape the foundation of their community. The art of story-telling is as far older than history. As a means of sharing and interpreting experiences, this art can be used as a method to teach principles and cultural norms. And the stories of Tribe are of no exception in this regard.

### **Orality in Tribal Society**

Many of the rural and tribal societies are barbaric in nature. Their history is not written but passed on from one generation to another, in the form of poetry, songs, proverbs, stories, narrative dances and various rituals. Their historical and cultural information are handed down through some of these means. Among these wide spectrums of transmitting modes, stories cling to the vital position among the Tribes. For imparting information and courage to their budding generations, they utilize stories as a powerful medium. Among the array of tribes across the world, the *Kootenai* people, a particular sect of Tribes who live in south-eastern British Columbia, Washington State, Idaho and Moutana, have a strong tradition of stories, conveyed by a word of mouth.

### **Kootenai Tribe**

Historically, this Kootenai tribe was characterized by two sub groups namely, *Upper Kootenai* and *Lower Kootenai*. The *Upper Kootenai* people were traditionally oriented with dark woods and mountain. They fished and gathered roots and berries along with their hunting of buffaloes in the prairies. Meanwhile, the *Lower Kootenai* tribes were associated with the survival around water. Fishing was their prime occupation. The wide variety of fishes like trout, salmon, sturgeon, suckers and whitefish were harvested along with their plantation in the river-banks.

This particular cult of tribes lived agreeably with the world of nature - migrating seasonally to follow the cycles of flora and fauna that sustained them. Nature has been a great

resource for their livelihood. In addition to food, they obtained their shelter, clothing and medicine from their terrain. They have made their clothing from plant fibres and bark tissues of trees. Their portable dwellings – made of lodge poles with buffalo skins – enable them for their seasonal exodus.

At the time of European settlement, these sub groups were merged and seven bands of Tribes were established. And today, these bands belong to *Ktunaxa nation*, five in Canada and two in United States of America. The existing *Ktunaxa Nation* continues to strive for strong and healthy communities while remembering and celebrating their history and culture. In this juncture, stories stood for the test of time and functions as a harbinger to hark back to their traditional past.

### ***Kootenai Stories***

In their primitive stage, story-telling is used as a verbal form of language that is associated with practices and standards that are essential to develop their own identity. They used stories as their tool to instruct the young ones about their culture, tradition, habit and their way of living. Storytelling is done at a certain time of year, generally winter, when there is more time to relax and absorb teachings. For centuries, *Kootenai* children and adults gathered on cold, dark winter nights to listen and learn from stories.

Recorded by *Kootenai* elders and illustrated by *Kootenai* artists from the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana, *How Marten Got His Spots: And Other Kootenai Stories* are originally intended to educate young tribal members about their history and culture. Since this collection of stories is packed with morals, it typically echoes their ethnicity and livelihood.

In *How Marten Got His Spots*, Marten and Mink are brothers. Mink, the elder, orders the younger Marten not to “go over the hill” (2). But out of curiosity, Marten ventures out which is resulted in “scorched himself too badly” (6) by the terrible Bear in the hill side. Marten learns a hard lesson for disobedience. The moral of ‘Pay heed to the elders’ is finely expressed through this story.

In *Coyote and Trout*, the greedy coyote marries a trout and she transforms himself as a ‘trout’. In the lake, always “coyote looked for the biggest piece” (17) of meat for his dish, he gulps

down “all the meat and the other trout had none” (18). Meanwhile, Fox, who has been travelling by the side of lake, heard that the trouts are straving because of coyote. He pulled him out of the water and made Coyote to repent for his greediness. This story clearly conveyed the message of “not to be so creedy” (21).

The *Little Weasel's Dream* story is located in the Berry field. The women and children ride for many hours by horseback to berry-picking. When they have reached the field, “The Children were given strict orders to stay close together near the elders” (26). Little Weasel, a three year old boy, “wandered too far and was lost” (29). Desperately trying to find his mother, he sits on a log and begins to cry. Exhausted by his cry, he falls asleep. In his dream, he happens to see a big, black bear coming towards him. He screams for help; by hearing the cry, his mother “ran to him, picked him up, and held him in her arms” (31). By his dream, Little Weasel learns a lesson: “Mind your elders” (32). Not only to him, but it should be a great lesson to all Children.

Finally, *Tepee Making* is an illustrated story about the construction of their conical shaped-tents. The making of the tepees are described evidently. It clearly indicates, “Tepee making takes a lot of hard work and skill” (39). This story explains, how they skillfully transmit the manufacturing of their tepees to the next generation with the illustrated description of Kootenai Tepee making.

This compilation of stories strikes a close affinity towards *Panchatantra* and *Aesop Fables*, by having many animals as characters and ends with a ‘moral’. Moreover these stories find its origin in oral tradition. However it also hints that Coyote, Marten and Mink are wild animals in dark, deep woods. So it can be taken as an indication that these tribes dwell amidst these animals in thick forests.

The women folk’s work nature is clearly shown in *Little Weasel's Dream*. And their flora and fauna are described by illuminating the land’s nature and about the winter season. Obviously it pictures that the *Kootenai* people lived with this adundance of valleys of berries. Lively description of these tales clearly reflects their nature of livelihood.

## Conclusion

Hence, *Kootenai* stories are a priceless 'culture-shaping' tool. They are an essential component to the survival of this sect of tribes. They include elements of responsibility, identity and a sense of belonging. There is an understanding among them that they will give back by transmitting these stories on, and thus keeping the stories and culture vibrant. From stories, the tribal children learn the very relative notions of 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong', and what is expected from them to lead a harmonious life. They are the foremost resources for disseminating what's really important to the race and their community.

Oral tradition is tantamount to the survival of the culture and traditions of these tribes. Traditionally the only way, they can know about their past is by, what they have been told. Without oral tradition, their knowledge and culture would be lost. Thus, orality and Tribal literature are entangled vivaciously with stories, which have been exploited to foster good discipline, listening skills and responsible behaviour among the tribes, especially with the tribal children.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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