

Truth in Fiction in the Writing of Julia Taylor Ebel

Julia Taylor Ebel is the author of seven North Carolina books that keep stories, although in different ways. Truth supports these stories, which draw from actual experience of North Carolina people.

Fiction Revealing Truth

Addie Clawson: Appalachian Mail Carrier is non-fiction, a brief picture book biography with photographs and sketches. Addie Clawson was the first female rural mail carrier in her area. In 1936, few women across the country delivered mail on rural routes. Addie's story needed to be told honestly and accurately—not as fiction. Enough information was available from family, newspaper articles, etc., to write a non-fiction account. The use of photographs tells readers that her story is real.

Yet her life was not without fictional commentaries. When the author inquired about her at the Boone Post Office, a young employee responded with a tale he had heard about how folks at the post office had to thaw her feet to get them out of the stirrups when she arrived at the post office on her horse. The tale was presented as truth, but it was not true. She did not ride her horse to the post office, just on the roughest parts of the route. The tale, then, was fiction based on fact. Yet, the story was important as it revealed how others saw Addie Clawson—as a dedicated and determined woman who defied expectation. That much was true! Fiction reveals perception.

Life Stretched a Little

Orville Hicks: Mountain Stories, Mountain Roots is the biography of mountain storyteller Orville Hicks, a North Carolina Heritage Award winner. The account of Orville's mountain childhood and his journey into storytelling is true, or at least as true as a storyteller can present it. Orville tells Jack Tales and other mountain lore that he heard on the hills and in the hollows near Beech Mountain—stories passed along through generations. Of course, these stories are fiction.

The book includes three short tales, but Orville's life is full of personal stories. Fact and fiction can blur as one looks back in years. Over time, the heart of the story is likely to remain, but the size of the fish can change. The stranger the events surrounding the story, the more room there is for stretching details in the next telling. And unexplainable events are fine fodder for story!

Exaggerated Truth in Folklore

Jack Tales and Mountain Yarns looks further into mountain tales. Far-fetched as they sound, these stories all have kernels of truth behind them. Consider Jack Tales. Who is Jack? Maybe he is not a particular boy, but he represents many mountain boys who have gotten by on wits and a good bit of luck. The storytellers knew the circumstances of survival in the mountains, the events of daily life. We see those elements, woven into each story.

Included in the text of *Jack Tales and Mountain Yarns* is a story that Orville wrote about storyteller Ray Hicks. The story tells of Ray as a boy, trying to care for his mother and siblings after his father died. While the account is fictional, it includes elements based on facts of the family situation and of mountain life. The story takes on qualities of Jack Tales, yet it is not as developed. Orville wrote this story; he has not told it. If he told it, he likely would embellish it. With each telling, the tale would become richer. And what if someone else heard the tale and told it? Folktales begin with pieces of truth in the familiar but outgrow that truth in repeated tellings.

Truth as Foundation: Filling in the Gaps

The story in *Walking Ribbon*, a children's picture book set in Liberty (Randolph County), began as the author's grandmother told about her own childhood walk with a calf that ran. With the grandmother no longer living and the story lacking details, Julia Ebel visited Liberty and asked questions to paint a picture of the town in 1898. Without honest presentation of the setting, this would be simply a cute story. She asked herself other questions: Where would a girl walk with a calf? Why? What would cause a calf to run? How would a girl respond? Even in a fictional picture book, truth is the basis for story. A foundation of truth enables the writer to accomplish a "willing suspension of disbelief."

In *Mama's Wreaths*, a story unfolding in a series of free verse poems, the experiences of a wreath maker in Watauga County and her daughter provided the foundation for the story. Without telling the exact happenings of their lives, the story uses their experiences, their colorful language, and some notable experiences to convey a story. In fact, their experience is representative of experiences of many Appalachian women who have made evergreen wreaths to sell and the children who watched the process as they grew up in homes that smelled like evergreens.

Composite Truth

Dresses, Dreams and Beadwood Leaves is a fictional story told in 37 free-verse poems. The story tells of mountain girl's journey to secure her self-esteem. Her determined efforts intertwine her wish to become a nurse someday, her longing for a store-bought dress, and the mountain heritage of herb gathering. Beadwood is witch hazel, which the girl gathers to sell.

Rosa May represents many girls with dreams—in the mountains or elsewhere—and those who struggle with being excluded and taunted by peers. The story builds on a composite of different individuals' experience. Girls who gathered beadwood leaves, mothers who sewed, a father who chose feed sacks carefully, a mother who dreamed of a nice house, a girl who felt the sting of exclusion, a child teased for wearing feed-sack clothing, young people who work for what they want, a mountain girl who dreamed of becoming a nurse, the man who bought herbs: each of these story elements began with a specific model.

Historical Truth and What If...?

The Picture Man began with a photograph of a girl standing barefoot on the bare back of the family workhorse. Research into the work of Appalachian picture man Willie Roby Trivett gave shape to the resulting text that leads from the picture man's arrival to the taking of the photograph, included as the final page of the story. Endnotes and actual photos acknowledge the historical contributions of the picture men who took photographs of people within their communities—honest photographs with minimal contrivance, yet pictures seldom seen by the public. What if a picture man had stopped by a mountain farm one day? What bit of truth would be captured?

Think Creatively

1. Read any story. Imagine what truth may be behind the fiction.
 - What story elements could be based on truth?
 - What do you think really happened?
 - Which story elements must be purely imaginary?
2. Explore and discuss the interplay of text and images and unfolding a story and the truth within it?
3. Read endnotes to learn about the background for a story.
 - Evaluate the influence of fact on the story.
 - Where to you see this influence revealed in the story?

Fiction is a means by which we keep actual stories—a vehicle for passing on heritage and what has mattered.

Julia Taylor Ebel's writing is dedicated to keeping stories and preserving heritage and to helping others find ways to keep their own stories.

Study Guides for Julia Taylor Ebel's books
are available on the individual book pages on her website:
www.juliaebel.com