

TALL TALE

Study Guide

Ideas for Educators to use before, during and after “Tall Tales Day” -- a day-long residency by Author Rick Sowash, “Master of the Tall Tale”

General Background on Tall Tales and Rick Sowash:

Children like Tall Tales. They are fun, funny, and exaggerated. Tall Tale heroes -- such as Johnny Appleseed, Sluefoot Sue, Paul Bunyan, John Henry, Annie Oakley, Pecos Bill, Mike Fink, Davy Crockett and his wife Sally Ann Thunder Ann -- are familiar to almost all children.

Because of this fondness and familiarity, an imaginative approach to Tall Tale literature presents a unique opportunity to help students sharpen their thinking, listening, discernment, language and communication skills.

Tall Tales (especially when told ‘live’ by a master storyteller) dramatically connect children with oral literature, theatre, listening skills, and American folklore -- besides generating a lot of laughter. This is why many schools emphasize Tall Tales. This Study Guide shows teachers some ways to make the most of Rick Sowash’s visit.

Underlying messages of Rick’s work in schools:

- 1) Books, storytelling, reading and writing are fascinating and fun.
- 2) With the younger children Rick explores the difference between a tall tale and a lie --tall tales are joyful and harmless, but other kinds of falsehood can be harmful.
- 3) With the older children Rick’s message is: Find what you love to do, learn all you can about it, become as good as you can at doing it, figure out a way to get paid to do it, and you’ll be happy in your work. Rick is skilled in writing, storytelling and piano-playing. He personifies this message. He also stresses the importance of writing skills to virtually all career paths.

What to expect during Rick Sowash’s day at your school: Rick prefers to perform two assemblies: a 25-minute assembly for the younger students (K-3) followed by a 40-minute assembly for the older students (4-6). If your school also serves grade K-8, Rick prefers to perform a third, separate 40-minute assembly for 7th & 8th graders. Rick enjoys eating lunch with the best student writers in your school. Rick makes time to personalize and autograph copies of his books “Ripsnorting Whoppers” and “Heroes of Ohio” which your school has sold to students and staff. And Rick offers three half hour “visits” with smaller groups, usually two or three classrooms combined. Rick can also visit briefly with afternoon the kindergarten classes who will have missed his morning assemblies.

About the assemblies: Many of the same lively stories are told in both assemblies, but the language and audience participation elements are more sophisticated for the older students. Prior to an assembly, while the students are filing in, Rick plays the piano, establishing his mastery of the keyboard and creating an atmosphere of listening and wonder.

Rick often uses the piano during parts of his storytelling assembly to provide background music and “sound effects.” No two assemblies Rick does are exactly alike. No two schools are alike; Rick customizes his assembly each time. Now and then Rick varies his Tall Tale material with a parable, a ghost story, a story from his own life or from his book “Heroes of Ohio.”

Which Tall Tales does Rick Sowash Tell? Not Paul Bunyan or Davy Crockett or Pecos Bill. The students should already know those stories. The stories in Rick’s unique repertoire are Ohio Tall Tales, the celebrated Tall Tales of the Ohio folk hero and storyteller, Cy Gattton (1863-1937), -- including retellings of Cy’s encounters with: a cucumber vine growing so rapidly in the “richest soil in Richland County” that it grew up around his neck and nearly choked him; a snake that bit his walking stick which then swelled up (When sawmilled into boards it was used to build an entire barn!), a pet wildcat that ate balls of yarn and later gave birth to a litter of kittens wearing sweaters, a cold snap that froze Cy’s shadow to the wall of the barn and turned his words to ice cubes, a practical jokester catfish who rode in Cy’s coat pocket; a bear that gets turned inside out; and the world’s fastest dog. (When he ran at full speed, it took three people to see him!)

Lunch With The Author: Who are the best writers in your school? Identify them by means of a Tall Tale Contest or assume that they’re all good writers and draw from a hat. Arrange for no more than 12 writer-winners to eat lunch with Rick Sowash during the day of his visit. Set up some tables in a quiet corner of the school where the writer-winners can escape the usual cafeteria scene and spend a quiet half-hour with a real, live author. Rick will shake every hand and learn every name. (Name-tags are helpful). Laminate student-made Tall Tale illustrations to use as placemats. The chocolate-covered malt-balls called “Whoppers” make a fun and fitting dessert. Each winner-writer should bring their lunch and a sample of their writing: their winning Tall Tale, another story, a poem, whatever. Rick really enjoys these occasions and so do the students! Rick will quickly read each student’s work and inscribe it with an encouraging compliment and an autograph. He will also present each writer-winner with a colorful pin-on button they can wear, proclaiming them “A Whopper of a Writer!”

Autographing Books: This a priority and must be taken seriously. Your school signed a contract with Rick, agreeing to make his books available as a part of the visit. In the same packet with this Study Guide you were sent large, colorful posters of Rick’s books and a folder entitled “How to Make a Hit with Rick Sowash’s Books, Tapes & CDs.” The information inside that folder will help your school sell many copies -- at greatly reduced prices -- by means of a unique a send-home form that allows parents and staff to indicate exactly how they would like the book to be personalized and signed. This form is returned to the school with a check. Collect the money and insert the returned form in each book. After lunch, when Rick sits down to autograph the books, he simply takes directions from each individual send-home form. A few days before Rick’s visit, phone his home at 1-888-251-2726 to tell him how many books to bring. Don’t worry -- he always brings extras!

About the half-hour “visits”: These are most meaningful for the older grade levels of the school, one grade level at a time, combining no more than three classes. Ideally, these visits should take place in the school library so that Rick can be “a book that’s come to life” and make some strong points about the value of reading, literally pointing to books on the library shelves. Rick describes the challenges he encounters in writing, emphacizing the writing process: Rough Draft, Add ‘Juicy’ Words, Cut the Clutter, Make some ‘Word Music.’ There’s also time for the students to ask questions.

What questions are especially welcome? Getting Started as a Storyteller, Traveling as a

Performer, Things that Go Wrong, Rick's Own Children, Favorite Stories, Getting Paid for Doing What You Love, Up and Downs of the Self-Employed, What's Your Next Book? and Royalties. If the students' questions aren't moving in these directions, Rick will direct them there.

Preparation of Students prior to Rick's residency:

Read or tell some classic Tall Tales about Paul Bunyan and other folk heroes. Explore the characteristics these heroes have in common. In *The Treasury of American Folklore*, B.A. Botkin says, "A composite picture of the American hero would show him to be a plain, tough, practical fellow, equally good at a bargain or a fight ... a salesman and a showman with a flair for prodigious stories and a general capacity for putting himself over." Examine with the students which of these colorful characteristics are illustrated in a particular story.

Display Tall Tale Books, Recordings, Posters: In the school library, hall or classrooms, make a display of tall tale materials. Most school libraries have plenty to offer. Recordings can also be explored. Make available headphones, a cassette player or CD player or phonograph. You will have received some free posters in the packet that included this Study Guide. Put 'em up!

Roots of the Tall Tale: How would early explorers have described Niagara Falls or the wonders of Yellowstone? Did their listeners suspect their descriptions were Tall Tales? This is one origin of America's Tall Tales. Another is the pioneers' need to laugh at the forces of nature that frightened them. Trying to laugh at what scares us can be one way to keep up our courage.

Two Tall Tale technical terms: Students need to understand the concepts of "exaggeration" and "hyperbole" [pronounced hy-PER-boh-lee]. Tall Tales use these devices for comic effect. Notice how tall tales often begin realistically but slowly and craftily sneak up on the impossible.

Dialects: Tall Tales are regional. Paul Bunyan is from the north woods, Pecos Bill from the far west, Davy Crockett from Tennessee. What an opportunity to consider "dialects!" Have the students ever spoken to someone from another part of the country? What differences in pronunciation did they notice? Which terms and expressions did they find to be different from their own? Examples children readily grasp are: "flapjack" vs. "pancake" or "pop" vs. "soda."

Tall Tales: Students can be encouraged to write and illustrate their own Tall Tales. These can be simple one-liners, such as: "A man was so tall that he had to climb up on a ladder just to brush his teeth!" "A woman could hear so well that she was kept awake at night by the sound of the tramping feet of the ants in her yard!" "It got to be so hot that the earthworms came out of the ground and lined up along the road to the lake, trying to hitch a ride with fishermen!" "One summer it rained so often that the fish in the rivers and lakes were found to be wearing raincoats and galoshes!"

A Word about Audience Skills: During an assembly schoolchildren have a unique opportunity to practice their "audience skills." We are not born knowing how to be an audience. We must learn when to listen, when to laugh, when to applaud. A little discussion about this in advance about these issues will help make the assemblies a success. If the students display good audience skills, Rick will acknowledge this at the end of the assemblies and thank and praise the students for doing so well.

‘Meaty’ Questions for discussion:

What are some of the differences between a Tall Tale and a lie?

Do Tall Tales hurt people’s feelings or trick them in a mean way?

Just because someone says something is true, does that make it true?

Who can we trust to tell the truth? Teachers? Doctors? Police? Firefighters? People with whom we live? Politicians? People on TV? Other kids? Strangers?

What is the difference between “make-believe” talk and “serious” talk?

What is the difference between a fact and an opinion?

How can we tell the difference?

Do Tall Tales always have to take place in faraway places? -- ie., in Paul Bunyan’s north woods or Pecos Bill’s Wild West -- or can they take place right here, where we live?

How does a figure from history become a folk hero?

What makes a good Storyteller?

What skills must a Storyteller master? What other professions use these skills?

Why is it important to master these skills?

What is the process of transforming “told” stories into a written book?

How is a book made and how does it come into our hands? (Imagining, writing, revising, editing, illustrating, printing, distributing, marketing, selling, purchasing, shelving in a library.)

Project Ideas relating to Tall Tales:

Make a Tall Tale out of a Familiar Story: Even very young students can work through a familiar story, either individually or as a class, exaggerating as many features of the story as they can think of. For example, in retelling “The Three Little Pigs,” the huffing and puffing of the wolf could be like a tornado, blowing down trees and blasting the water out of riverbeds. The house made of sticks could be reduced to toothpicks or popsicle sticks, etc., a few of which could actually be displayed at the end of the story to “prove it’s true” ...?

Nature-based Tall Tales: Older students can write their own Tall Tales and should be encouraged to do so using objects, animals and phenomena of Nature, such as stories of animals and plants interacting with people. Such stories have a greater potential to awaken curiosity about the natural world and also keeps the children within American Tall Tale storytelling traditions.

Stretching the ordinary into the impossible: Then again, some students respond more readily to the challenge of exaggerating an ordinary daily event until it becomes a Tall Tale. Sometimes it is helpful for the teacher to supply the opening sentence. These are called “Story Starters.” For example: “When the cereal box was opened up at the breakfast table this morning, something very unexpected came popping out!” or “The schoolbus set out as usual, but little did the driver know what lay ahead!” or “When the playground swing and monkeybars started floating up into the sky one day....”

Animal Tall Tales: Write the names of various animals on as many cards as there are students in your class. Have them each draw one card from a hat and then write and illustrate a Tall Tale about what happened when a hero encountered that animal in the wild.

Create a Class Tall Tale: The teacher or a student can select an opening sentence. Each student adds a sentence to the story as a paper is passed around the room. Writing the story down creates some safety for students who may be too shy to recite aloud to the class the sentence they’ve thought of.

Locations of the stories: Where do the stories take place? Make a bulletin board in the shape of a map of America. As Tall Tales are read, or as new Tall Tales are created, help the students locate the places mentioned and label them. For example, John Chapman (“Johnny Appleseed”) was born in Leominster, MA and is buried in Ft. Wayne, IN.

Tall Tale Costumes on the day of Rick’s visit: One school Rick Sowash visited really surprised him! Most of the students and staff in the school were dressed as American folk-heroes! There were Paul Bunyans with beards, flannel shirts and jeans -- they even carried toy axes! There were Johnny Appleseeds with Tin Pots on their heads, Bibles in the belts, bare feet, and bags of seed. There were John Henrys with sledge hammers. There were Davy Crocketts with Coonskin caps and fringed coats. There were pioneer girls, dressed as Betty Zane or Molly Pitcher. There were Annie Oakleys, Betsy Rosses and Sojourner Truths and Amelia Earharts complete with goggles and aviator jackets! The Ninja Turtles, Batman and Superman were also represented. Perhaps these stretched the definition a bit -- but it was fun and, well, why not? Prizes (a free copy of “Ripsnorting Whoppers”) were given for the best costumes.

A Tall Tale Festival: Another school held a Tall Tale Festival, taking Rick’s day-long residency on into the evening with families invited to come in costume with blankets and pillows and spread out all over the gym floor while Rick put on a 45-minute Tall Tale Show. There was a lot of buildup prior to this event. Each class created a Tall Tale to share with the school and the best Tall Tales from each grade level were read over the intercom during the morning announcements each day during the week prior to Rick’s visit to the school.

Afterwards:

Follow-up after your school’s day with Rick Sowash: After the assembly or in the days after the residency, the children can be encouraged to express their memory of the experience by illustrating some scenes from the stories Rick told. This will also help the children to realize that everyone has a slightly different “picture” in their imaginations of just what an event in a story looked like.

Stories Told, Read, Seen-and-Heard: Explore the similarities and differences between a story that is told, a story that is read, a story that is acted out in a play and a story in a movie.

Suggested Books on Tall Tales:

Ripsnorting Whoppers: Humor from the American Heartland, by Rick Sowash

Whoppers: Tall Tales & Other Lies, by Alvin Schwartz

The Great American Liar: A Treasury of Tall Tales, by James E. Myers

American Tall Tale Animals, by Adrien Stoutenburg

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Larger Than Life: Adventures of American Legendary Heroes, by Robert San Souci

Folktales from around the World: Tall Tales, Steck-Vaughn Co.

New Tall Tales of Pecos Bill, by Paul Felton

Paul Bunyan, by Steve Kellogg

Johnny Appleseed, by Steven Kellogg

Cut From the Same Cloth: American Women of Myth, Legend & Tall Tale, by Robert San Souci

Yankee Doodle’s Cousins, by Malcomson

Tall Tale America: A Legendary History of Our Humorous Heroes, by Walter Blair

Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind Crockett, by Caron Lee Cohen

Jim Bridger’s Alarm Clock & Other Tales, by Sid Fleischman

Biography of the “Master of the Tall Tale”:

Rick Sowash (b. 1950) lives with his family in Cincinnati, OH. He and his wife, Jo, have two children: a daughter named Shenandoah (after the song, the park and the river) and a son named John Chapman (after Ohio’s best-known Tall Tale folk hero, Johnny Appleseed).

Rick has been a church musician, a broadcaster for a classical music radio station, an innkeeper, a theatre director and a County Commissioner (no kidding!) in his native Richland County, Ohio. He is also a composer whose classical compositions have been published, performed, recorded and broadcast around the world.

Rick has been a full-time Visiting Author since 1991. He performs more than 100 engagements each year, mostly in elementary schools -- his favorite venue. His work recovering and re-telling Ohio Tall Tales was the subject of a public television documentary entitled “Cy Gattin & the Great American Whopper.” The video and also a cassette of Rick’s stories are both available directly from Rick.

Rick Sowash’s 60-minute video, 60-minute cassette and 160-page book of Ohio Tall Tales are all three entitled

Ripsnorting Whoppers: Humor from the American Heartland

Also, check out Rick Sowash’s book:

Heroes of Ohio: 23 True Tales of Courage and Character

Rick’s newest book is:

Critters, Flitters & Spitters: 24 Amazing Ohio Animal Tales

These tales, taken together, tell what might be called "The Story of Ohio." Tales from long ago: the Ice Age, the Moundbuilders, the Shawnee, pioneers, the Civil War. Tales of the Amish, Lake Erie, the Ohio River, zoos, parks and farms. Some are funny, some are sad. Some are scary, some are inspiring. More info is available on my website: www.sowash.com

Please send checks or p.o.'s to:

The Rick Sowash Publishing Co.
558 Liberty Hill
Cincinnati, OH 45202-6888

Cost for Rick’s books: \$19.95 for hardbound, \$11.95 for softbound. Plus sales tax of 6% if applicable. Shipping is free.

Reserve a date on Rick’s crowded calendar by calling him anytime
TOLL FREE at 1-888-255-2764.

**For more info. visit Rick Sowash's Web Page:
www.sowash.com**