

A Storyteller And His Art

B y N . S C O T T M O M A D A Y

THERE IS ONLY ONE STORY, AFTER ALL,
AND IT IS ABOUT THE PURSUIT OF MAN BY GOD, AND IT IS ABOUT A MAN
WHO VENTURES OUT TO THE EDGE OF THE WORLD,
AND IT IS ABOUT HIS WIFE, WHO IS FAITHFUL OR UNFAITHFUL, AND IT IS ABOUT
THE HUNTING OF A GREAT BEAST. —THE ANCIENT CHILD

To tell a story in the proper way, to hear a story told in the proper way, this is a very old and sacred business, and it is very good. At that moment when we are drawn into the element of language, we are as intensely alive as we can be; we create and we are created. That existence in the maze of words is our human condition. Because of language we are, among all the creatures in our world, the most dominant and the most isolated. Our dominance is supreme, and our isolation is profound. That equation is the very marrow of story. It is a story in itself. We have no being beyond our stories. Our stories explain us, justify us, sustain us, humble us, and forgive us. And sometimes they injure and destroy us. Make no mistake, we are at risk in the presence of words. Perhaps the greatest stories are those which disturb us, which

shake us from our complacency, which threaten our well-being. It is better to enter into the danger of such a story than to keep safely away in a space where the imagination lies dormant.

But there are stories and there are stories. Our spirits are appropriately buoyed by story. Children delight in stories which excite the imagination, whether they disturb the peace of mind or not. Stories are sometimes informed with great delicacy and wonder. We are shaken and soothed in turn by stories. One of the principal rules of storytelling is that a balance must be struck. Perhaps the central function of storytelling is to reflect the forces, within and without us, that govern our lives, both good and bad. This is a very simple notion, but it is profound. Stories are pools of reflection in which we see ourselves through the prism of the imagination.

The Indian Dog

When I was growing up I lived in a pueblo in New Mexico. There one day I bought a dog. I was twelve years old, the bright autumn air was cold and delicious, and the dog was an unconscionable bargain at five dollars. ▼

on that day—and to me—it was noble and brave and handsome.

It was full of resistance, and yet it was ready to return my deep, abiding love; I could see that. It needed only to make a certain adjustment in its lifestyle, to shift the focus of its vitality from one frame of reference to another. But I had to ▼

indomitable will.

I was crushed at the time, but strangely reconciled, too, as if I had perceived intuitively some absolute truth beyond all the billboards of illusion.

The Indian dog had done what it had to do, had behaved exactly as it must, had been true to itself and to the sun and moon. It knew its place in the scheme of things, and its place was precisely there, with its right des-

tiny, in the tracks of the wagon. In my mind's eye I could see it at that very moment, miles away, plodding in the familiar shadows, panting easily with relief, after a bad night, contemplating the wonderful ways of man.

Caveat emptor. But from that experience I learned something about the heart's longing. It was a lesson worth many times five dollars. LC



It was an Indian dog; that is, it belonged to a Navajo man who had come to celebrate the Feast of San Diego. It was one of two or three rangy animals following in the tracks of the man's covered wagon as he took leave of our village on his way home. Indian dogs are marvelously independent and resourceful, and they have an idea of themselves, I believe, as knights and philosophers.

The dog was not large, but neither was it small. It was one of the unremarkable creatures that one sees in every corner of the world, the common denominator of all its kind. But

drag my dog from its previous owner by means of a rope. It was nearly strangled in the process, its bushy tail wagging happily all the while.

That night I secured my dog in the garage, where there was a warm clean pallet, wholesome food, and fresh water, and I bolted the door. And the next morning the dog was gone, as in my heart I knew it would be; I had read such a future in its eyes. It had squeezed through a vent, an opening much too small for it, or so I had thought. But as they say, where there is a will there is a way—and the Indian dog was possessed of one

A Closer Look

1 According to Momaday, how does language make human beings both dominant and isolated? What do we dominate? From what are we isolated?

2 Why would the greatest stories be those that “shake us from our complacency”? Do the two stories included here do that?

3 What is the lesson Momaday learns from the Indian dog? Does he also learn a lesson from the story about Sister Blandina? In each story, what is Momaday saying about individual identity? What is he saying about destiny?

The Physicians of Trinidad

ROSA MARIA SEGALE was born in Cicagna, Italy, in 1850. When she was four years old her family moved to America and settled in Cincinnati, Ohio. There, in 1866, Rosa entered the motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity and began a long and eventful religious life as Sister Blandina Segale, S.C. She was a member of this society for three quarters of a century; she died in Cincinnati in 1941, one month after her ninety-first birthday.

Sister Blandina was missioned to the West in 1872, and she lived for twenty-one years in the Territories of Colorado and New Mexico. During this period of time she kept a diary, which was published in 1932 under the title *At the End of the Santa Fe Trail*.

"Your real danger is from cowboys," she was told when she set out for the little town of Trinidad, Colorado, in the winter of 1872. "No virtuous woman is safe near a cowboy." And yet Sister Blandina seemed utterly fearless on the frontier.

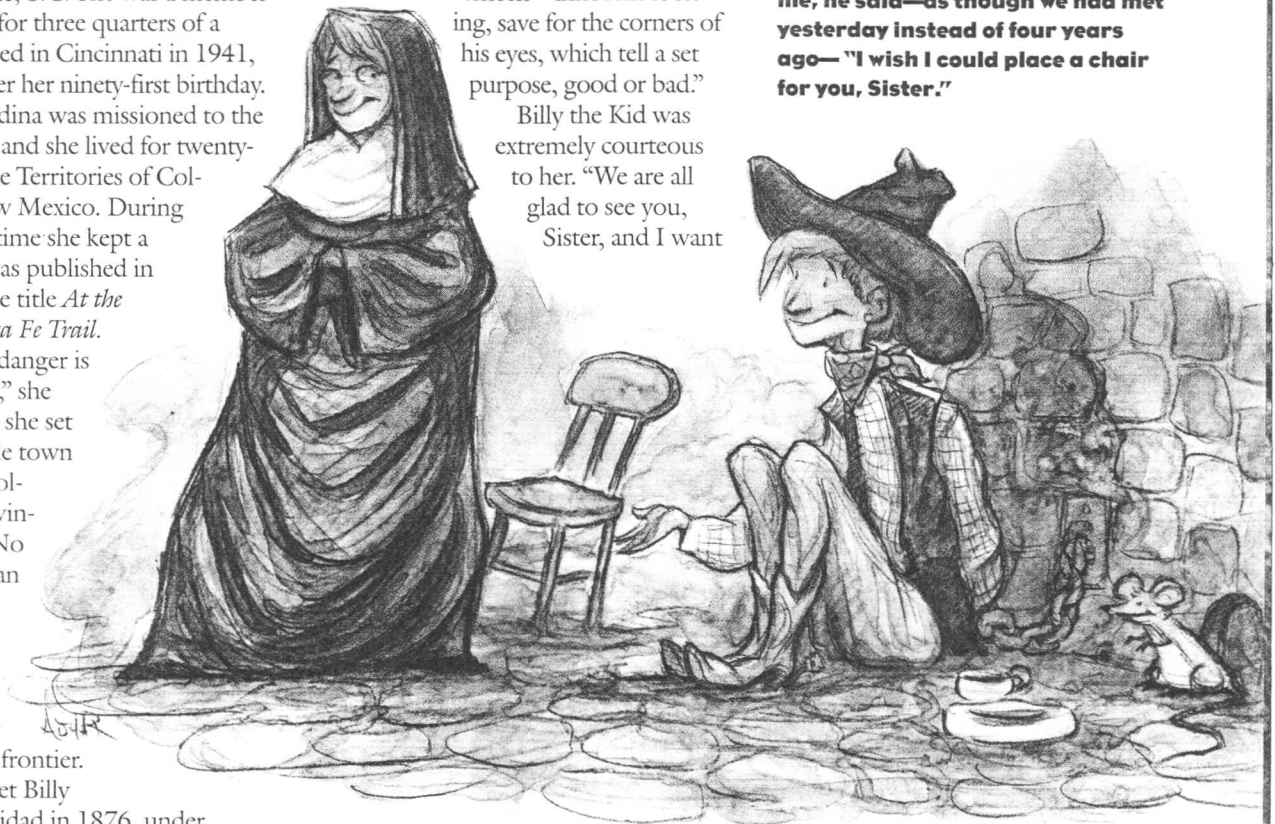
She first met Billy the Kid at Trinidad in 1876, under strange circumstances. It is a good story, and an interesting variation on the old theme of the dying cowboy. Here are the particulars.

A man named Schneider, a member of the notorious gang led by Billy the Kid, appeared in Trinidad, mortally wounded. There he remained until he died, a period of several months. During this time Sister Blandina became Schneider's friend and confidante. To her he confessed a number of heinous crimes. One day he announced to her excitedly that Billy the Kid and other members of the gang were coming on Saturday afternoon at two o'clock. They were coming to scalp the four physicians of Trinidad, he said, for the reason that none of them had been good enough to treat his wound. Sister Blandina was horrified,

and she allowed that she would most certainly be there on Saturday in order to confront the gang of outlaws in Schneider's room. His friends would be delighted to meet her, Schneider said; he had told them a good deal about her.

Saturday at the appointed time she entered the room to find the gang gathered about Schneider's bed. Introductions were made. Afterward Sister Blandina wrote in her diary: "The leader, Billy, has steel-blue eyes, peach complexion, is young, one would take him to be seventeen—innocent-looking, save for the corners of his eyes, which tell a set purpose, good or bad."

Billy the Kid was extremely courteous to her. "We are all glad to see you, Sister, and I want



to say it would give me pleasure to be able to do you any favor?"

"Yes, there is a favor you can grant me," replied the nun.

"The favor is granted," said the outlaw. And so the physicians of Trinidad, all four of them, were spared. Perhaps the considerable generosity of the moment was lost upon them, I don't know. But it was not lost upon Sister Blandina. She was moved to philosophical reflection: "Life is a mystery," she wrote in her diary. "What of the human heart? A compound of goodness and wickedness. Who has ever solved the secret of its workings? I thought: one moment diabolical, the next angelical."

Soon thereafter Sister Blandina was sent to continue her good work in Santa Fe, City of the Holy Faith. There, four

years after their first encounter, she met Billy the Kid for the second and last time. The circumstances were different. Billy was a prisoner. On May 16, 1881, she wrote:

I have just returned from the jail. The two prisoners were chained hands and feet, but the "Kid" besides being cuffed hands and feet, was also fastened to the floor. You can imagine the extreme discomfort of the position. When I got into the prison cell and "Billy" saw me, he said—as though we had met yesterday instead of four years ago—"I wish I could place a chair for you, Sister."

Though Billy the Kid was killed two months later, Sister Blandina must not have heard of his death until several weeks had passed, for it was September 8 when she wrote at Albuquerque, "Poor, poor 'Billy the Kid' was shot by Sheriff Patrick F. Garrett of Lincoln County."

Sister Blandina Segale, when she left New Mexico Territory, returned to live out her life in Ohio. In those later years she must have dreamed now and then of Billy the Kid. In her old age, when she was eighty-nine or ninety, I wonder if there were not times when she entered into a dimly lighted room, and there a boy—forever a boy, shackled to a moment remote but in her mind—smiled, spoke kindly to her, and placed a chair, gently, gently, at her back. **LC**

Review Sheet #3:

Introduction & Two Stories by N. Scott Momaday

I. THE ORAL TRADITION

Momaday's writing reflects the oral culture of his Native American heritage. Different though writing and storytelling may be, Momaday manages to transfer various aspects of the oral tradition into his writing.

A. According to Momaday (see "Introduction"), what is the central purpose of storytelling? _____

B. Where in "The Physicians of Trinidad" does the narrator first remind readers that he is telling them a story? _____

C. Consider the following reference to the four doctors whose lives were spared:

Perhaps the considerable generosity of the moment was lost upon them, I don't know.

1. What is the narrator's tone here? _____

2. How would you describe the distance between the narrator and the reader here? _____

D. Cite another place in the story where the narrator refers to his own thoughts—"speculates aloud"—as someone telling a story might: _____

II. SYMBOL

A *symbol* is something which is itself but also stands for something else—a person, place, event, or object that suggests something beyond its literal significance. Repeated appearances of a particular object throughout a story may signal that the object is being used as a symbol.

A. What might the dog in "The Indian Dog" symbolize? _____

B. What might the tracks of the man's wagon represent? _____

C. What might the speaker's encounter with the dog symbolize? _____

D. What might the chair in "The Physicians of Trinidad" represent? _____

III. CLICHE

A cliché is an expression so often used that its freshness has worn off. Some examples are "got his goat," and "kicked up a fuss."

A. Identify one cliché found in the story "The Indian Dog": _____

B. Does this cliché add to or detract from the atmosphere of the story? _____

C. Why might Momaday—a writer with a deep respect for words—choose to use a cliché in this story? _____

IV. ANALYSIS OF THE CUMULATIVE SENTENCE

Writing Project: Use the following sentence from "The Indian Dog" as a model for your own cumulative sentence:

In my mind's eye I could see it at that very moment, miles away, plodding in the familiar shadows, panting easily with relief, after a bad night, contemplating the wonderful ways of man.

A. At some point, everyone experiences loss or separation. Think of various situations in which you have been separated from someone or something you care about. Make a list of these people, animals, places, objects, etc.

B. Choose one of these.

C. Put yourself back at the time when you realized your loss.

D. Jot down some of your thoughts and feelings. How did you feel when you realized _____ was gone? What had preceded the separation? What images or memories came to mind as you pictured _____?

E. Use the following framework to capture that image:

In my _____ I could see _____,
 _____, _____ *ing* _____,
 _____ *ing* _____, after _____, _____ *ing* _____.

F. Revise your sentence, altering the framework if you wish.