

## “You Can Almost Picture It”

The aesthetic of a tall tale or a story is something that any good storyteller strives for – the imagery that is so vivid “you can almost picture it”. As an ideal, this aesthetic is useful as a tool that both researchers and members of the culture can use to gauge their own cultural traditions, as well as providing a context for how the individuals gauge their own traditions.

The aesthetic is demonstrated with the anecdote about Saber Tooth – a woman who was rumoured to be able to eat peanuts through chicken wire – and with Coffil's stories about lobsters bigger than the boat he caught them in, and his joking threats to eat a whole bag of potatoes on the spot if not offered help to get them into the house and put away properly. Veracity is not an issue (this is *exaggeration* humor, after all) so much as how vivid the image brought to mind can be made. A lobster so large its claws hang over the bow and its tail hangs off the end of the boat does make for very impressive imagery with regards to how large it was, as does an off-handed comment about needing to be careful to avoid sailing a boat into a fish's mouth.

It is interesting to note that, as part of his aesthetic, a significant portion of Coffil's tall tales are actually contextual – that is, they are stories about other stories he has told. The anecdote about how he went about one-upping an outsider who attempted to engage in some tall tale telling of his own and perhaps challenging Coffil's position as the one known for telling really good stories (or at least doing so in Coffil's eyes) falls into this category: the story focuses more on the reaction of the outsider to being outdone in a contest of big fish stories with Coffil, than on the story about the big fish itself.

Another interesting point is that Coffil's exaggerations are truly spontaneous – he weaves them into regular conversation and comes up with them on the spot, rather than preparing and rehearsing stories. This is his niche. But his repertoire does suffer a little, in this; he could provide only four local folktales that were not tall tales of some sort, and two of those had been turned into tall tales. The third was a brief anecdote, and he was barely able to remember the fourth well enough to tell it.

There are good reasons for the aesthetic being prized. It gives a mark by which folk traditions can be judged, and provides a standard to which others can strive to live up to or excel. The more distinct the aesthetic in question is, and the more a noticeable effort is required in order to achieve it, the more it is valued within the culture. For example, being able to tell a story that evokes imagery so vivid, it's lifelike; or being able to catch exceptionally large fish or do prodigious amounts of manual labour without visible effort.

Coffil describes a “good” storyteller as being one who has enough life experience and who has travelled widely enough to have a supply of true accounts that could be passed off as, or believed to be, tall tales by those who have not gone through similar experiences. However, his own behaviour (telling tales that are completely fabricated, or stretching the truth about specific incidents until it becomes a tall tale) implies that an ability to exaggerate believably – or at least, to exaggerate in a way that encourages the listeners to be willing to suspend their belief – is an equally valuable trait for a good storyteller.