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## **Native American Pourquoi Stories**

November is Native American Heritage Month, a good time to talk about native legends. Tell your students that many Indian legends are called pourquoi stories, which means they explain why certain things in nature are the way they are. (Pourquoi means "why" in French. If you have Spanish-speaking students, point out that the Spanish equivalent is *porque*.) A pourquoi story might tell why spiders spin webs, why we have seasons, or why the stars are in the sky. Many cultures around the world have their own pourquoi stories that were told long ago. Have students read the three Native American legends provided below in pairs or in small groups. Discuss the stories as a class. What part of nature does each story explain? Which legend has four different nature explanations, and what are they? Point out that many legends teach lessons about how people should or shouldn't act, as well. What lessons do your students see in these stories? Which two stories have a similar message? What theme is found in all three stories? (Beware of pride and vanity.)

| Legend                                             | What does it explain?                                                                                                                 | What lessons does it teach?                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Grandmother<br>Spider Steals the<br>Sun (Cherokee) | How the sun and fire came to be, why opossums' tails are bare, why buzzards' heads are bare, how the Cherokee learned to make pottery | Just because you're small and quiet doesn't mean you can't get the job done. Each person has unique gifts and abilities. |
| The Birds and<br>the Animals Play<br>Ball (Creek)  | Why bats are<br>defined as<br>animals, not<br>birds                                                                                   | Just because you're small and quiet doesn't mean you can't get the job done. Each person has unique gifts and abilities. |
| Rabbit's Tail<br>(Cherokee)                        | Why rabbits have short tails                                                                                                          | Don't brag, and<br>don't get caught<br>up in surface<br>things like looks.                                               |

Next, assign students to work individually and write their own pourquoi stories. They should start by brainstorming a list of at least six things in nature that they could explain. For example, why is there a moon in the sky, and why does it change shape? Why do ladybugs have spots? Point out that in pourquoi stories, many or all of the characters are animals. When your students finish their stories, have them get feedback from a partner or small group, polish their work, and share their stories with the class.

The following are additional picture book retellings of pourquoi stories that you can share with your students as they are getting ready to write their own stories. Let your class know that some Indian legends are also trickster tales, in which a clever character fools someone else. For example, in one of the legends your students just read, Fox tricks Rabbit into losing his tail.

Coyote Places the Stars, retold by Harriet Peck Taylor (Wasco)

How the Stars Fell into the Sky, retold by Gerrie Oughton (Navajo; another Coyote tale)

Fire Race: A Karuk Coyote Tale of How Fire Came to the People, retold by Jonathan London and Lanny Pinola

Raven: A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest, retold by Gerald McDermott (about stealing the sun)

A Story, a Story, retold by Gail E. Haley (West Africa, an Anansi tale)

Anansi and the Talking Melon, retold by Eric A. Kimmel (West Africa)

Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears, retold by Verna Aardema (West Africa)

Why the Sun and the Moon Live in the Sky, retold by Elphinstone Dayrell (Nigeria)

**EXTENSION:** Have students record themselves reading their stories or some of the picture book legends. Consider giving these tapes to hospitals and nursing homes so that they can be played for patients and residents. The recorded stories can also be sent to military personnel serving overseas.

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# **Native American Pourquoi Stories**

### **Native American Pourquoi Stories**

#### GRANDMOTHER SPIDER STEALS THE SUN (CHEROKEE)

When the world first began there was no light, and everyone kept bumping into each other. "We need to see!" they all said. "How can we get some light?"

Now Fox had been slipping around looking at things near and far, so he spoke up. "There are people on the other side of the world who have light. But they're selfish and won't share."

"We're going to have to steal it," said Possum. "I'll go. I can hide a piece of light in my tail." And since Possum had a big, bushy tail, everyone thought it would work.

Away went Possum to the other side of the world. Sure enough, the people there had a sun hanging up in a tree, shining its light all over the place. Possum sneaked up the back of the tree without any trouble and stole a bit of sunlight. But as he started to leave, the piece of sun began burning the fur on his tail. The people over there caught him and took the stolen light back. That's why Possum's tail is bare to this day.

Next Buzzard wanted to try. "I would never put a piece of sun in my tail. I'll carry it on my head." Off Buzzard flew to the other side of the world. It wasn't hard for him to reach the treetop to steal some light from the sun. Buzzard put the piece of sunlight on his head and started flying away, but the stolen light began to burn the feathers on top of his head. Buzzard let out a wail, flapping around so much he dropped the light he had stolen. Buzzard's head has been hare ever since.

Back on the dark side of the world everyone sat in silence, not knowing what to do. Then a little voice said, "I'll go."

"Grandmother Spider?" the others asked doubtfully. "But you're so small." Still, no one else had a plan, so they agreed that Grandmother Spider would try.

Grandmother Spider had been thinking carefully. She found some clay and made it into a little pot with a lid. After that she spun a web, spun and spun it till the strands reached clear to the other side of the world.

By this time the people over there were watching for thieves, but Grandmother Spider was so small they didn't even notice her. She climbed up the tree where the sun was hanging and stole a scrap of light. Then she popped the sunlight in her clay pot and ran silently along one strand of her web till she was home again.

So that's how Grandmother Spider brought fire and light to the Cherokees. She taught them how to make pottery, too.

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# **Native American Pourquoi Stories**

### RABBIT'S TAIL (CHEROKEE)

In the earliest times, Rabbit had a beautiful, long bushy tail—even bushier than Fox's. The trouble was, he was always bragging about it. Whenever he was around, Rabbit told everybody all about how much his tail gleamed in the sunlight and how thick and wonderful it was. Finally Fox got tired of listening to Rabbit brag, and he decided to do something about it.

This was in the winter, and the lake had frozen over. Fox went down to the lake with four fish. He cut a hole in the ice and then tied the fish to his tail. He knew Rabbit was going to pass by pretty soon, so he waited a bit. When Fox saw Rabbit coming, he dropped his tail into the hole, fish and all.

"What are you doing?" Rabbit asked.

"Fishing," said Fox.

"With your tail?" Rabbit asked, astonished.

"That's the best way," Fox said. "Look." And he flipped those four fish out onto the ice. Rabbit's eyes got really big. Fox added, "If I catch enough fish this week, I'll be able to go down to the Cherokee village and trade them for a pair of beautiful tail combs."

"Tail combs," Rabbit repeated. And he thought to himself, If I fish all night, I can catch enough fish to get the tail combs before Fox can!

"I'm done for the day," Fox said. "I'll come back in the morning." He walked away with his four fish, laughing quietly to himself.

As soon as Fox left, Rabbit dropped his wonderful tail through the hole in the ice. He waited a long while. He didn't catch any fish, and it was getting colder and colder. Rabbit almost left, but then he thought of those tail combs. It was worth putting up with the cold for tail combs!

In the morning, Fox came back. "What are you doing, Rabbit?"

"F-f-fishing," Rabbit said, shivering hard as can be.

"Doesn't look like you've caught anything," Fox said.

"N-n-no. And n-n-now my t-t-t-tail is s-s-stuck."

"I'll help you," Fox said, acting sympathetic. Then he gave Rabbit a great big shove. Rabbit yelled as he went tumbling clear across the ice—but his tail didn't come with him. It was still frozen under the lake.

After that, Rabbit only had a little stub of a tail, and he never bragged to Fox or anyone else about it again.

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### **Native American Pourquoi Stories**

#### THE BIRDS AND THE ANIMALS PLAY BALL (CREEK)

Once long ago the four-footed animals challenged the birds to a ball game. The birds accepted and everyone showed up very excited, sure their team was going to win. Little Bat was one of the players, or at least she wanted to be. "I'm ready!" she cried in her shrill voice.

"Ready for what?" Bear said. "You belong on the other side. You have wings."

Bat flew toward the birds, but Crane said, "Go back. You're one of them. You have teeth and hair."

Bat flew around in the middle, not sure what to do. Then Bear felt sorry for her. "All right. You can play with us. Just don't get in the way."

Bat danced in the air, she was so happy.

The game began, and at first the birds were winning. They kept taking the ball and scoring, flying right over the heads of the animals. Crane was the strongest player. He scored again and again.

Bat had been hanging back like Bear told her to, but she couldn't stand it anymore. She burst up and grabbed that ball, then flew quickly to the goal and scored. Again and again she scored. Crane tried to score again, but he was a slow flier, and Bat was really fast.

When the animals won, Bear said, "Bat won the ball game for us." Everyone knew it was true.

Of course, the birds wished they had let Bat play for them. "Maybe you are a bird," Woodpecker called hopefully.

"No," said Rat. "She has hair and teeth. It's obvious she is an animal." And from then on, everyone has agreed—Bat is an animal, not a bird.