

african american folktales

african american folktales are a rich tapestry of oral tradition, history, and cultural wisdom passed down through generations. These stories have played a vital role in shaping the identity and heritage of African American communities, blending African roots with influences from Native American and European cultures. This article explores the origins, themes, notable characters, and enduring impact of African American folktales, highlighting their importance in literature, education, and cultural preservation. Readers will discover the unique storytelling techniques, the moral lessons often conveyed, and the most popular tales that continue to captivate audiences today. Whether you are a student, educator, or history enthusiast, this comprehensive guide will deepen your understanding of african american folktales and reveal why these stories remain relevant in modern society.

- Origins and Historical Background of African American Folktales
- Common Themes in African American Folktales
- Famous Characters and Story Types
- Storytelling Techniques and Oral Tradition
- Influence on American Literature and Culture
- Preservation and Modern Adaptations

Origins and Historical Background of African American Folktales

The roots of african american folktales can be traced back to the early days of slavery in North America. Enslaved Africans brought with them a vibrant oral tradition, filled with stories, songs, and proverbs. These narratives were often adapted to reflect new realities, blending elements from African, Native American, and European folklore. Over time, african american folktales evolved into a unique genre that served multiple purposes: offering entertainment, teaching life lessons, and providing subtle forms of resistance.

Oral storytelling was a means of preserving heritage and fostering community among enslaved people. The tales provided comfort, hope, and guidance during times of hardship. Storytellers incorporated coded messages and allegories to impart wisdom or critique social injustice. As generations passed, these folktales continued to evolve, reflecting the changing circumstances and resilience of African American communities.

Common Themes in African American Folktales

African American folktales explore a variety of themes, often focusing on survival, cleverness, freedom, and justice. These stories use symbolism and metaphor to convey deeper meanings, making them powerful tools for teaching values and coping with adversity.

Survival and Resistance

Many african american folktales feature protagonists who must outwit oppressive forces or overcome difficult circumstances. These narratives reflect the historical experiences of slavery and the struggle for civil rights, celebrating resourcefulness and perseverance.

Cleverness and Trickster Motifs

Trickster characters are central to african american folklore. These figures use intelligence and wit to escape trouble or turn the tables on authority. The stories of Br'er Rabbit, for example, showcase the value of quick thinking and adaptability in challenging situations.

Freedom and Transformation

The pursuit of freedom is a recurring theme in african american folktales. Characters often seek liberation from physical or spiritual constraints, symbolizing the broader quest for equality and self-determination.

Moral Lessons and Social Commentary

Folktales frequently offer moral guidance, addressing issues such as honesty, humility, and kindness. They also provide subtle critiques of injustice, encouraging listeners to question authority and seek fairness in their own lives.

Famous Characters and Story Types

African American folktales are populated by a diverse array of characters, each with distinct personalities and roles. These stories range from animal tales to supernatural legends, reflecting the complexity of cultural influences.

Br'er Rabbit and Animal Tricksters

Br'er Rabbit is one of the most iconic trickster figures in African American folklore. Originating from African stories about clever hares, Br'er Rabbit uses cunning to outsmart stronger opponents like Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear. His adventures highlight the importance of intelligence over brute strength.

John and Old Master Tales

Stories featuring characters like John and the Old Master often depict the dynamics between enslaved people and their owners. John, the clever slave, repeatedly outwits the Old Master, symbolizing the triumph of intellect and spirit over oppression.

Supernatural Legends and Conjure Tales

Conjure tales blend elements of magic, spirits, and supernatural power. These stories draw from African spiritual traditions and often center on themes of transformation, protection, and ancestral guidance. The character of High John the Conqueror is a notable example, representing strength and hope.

Folktale Types and Structures

- Animal Tales: Stories featuring talking animals with human traits.
- Trickster Tales: Narratives focused on clever characters who outwit adversaries.
- Conjure Stories: Legends involving magic, spirits, and supernatural events.
- Moral Tales: Fables that teach important life lessons and ethical values.

Storytelling Techniques and Oral Tradition

The art of storytelling is central to african american folktales. Oral tradition emphasizes performance, improvisation, and audience engagement, making each telling unique. Storytellers use rhythm, repetition, and call-and-response to create a dynamic experience.

Performance and Participation

Storytellers often incorporate music, gestures, and dramatic voices to bring characters to life. Audience participation is encouraged through call-and-response, ensuring listeners remain engaged and connected to the narrative.

Adaptation and Variation

Oral tradition allows folktales to change over time, adapting to new contexts and audiences. Each storyteller may add personal touches, regional details, or contemporary references, keeping the stories fresh and relevant.

Influence on American Literature and Culture

African American folktales have had a profound impact on literature, music, and art in the United States. Writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Joel Chandler Harris collected and published these stories, preserving them for future generations. Elements of folktale tradition can be seen in blues music, jazz, and modern storytelling.

These stories have inspired countless authors, poets, and artists, helping to shape the broader narrative of American culture. Themes of resilience, creativity, and justice found in african american folktales continue to resonate in contemporary works.

Preservation and Modern Adaptations

Efforts to preserve african american folktales include community storytelling events, educational programs, and published collections. Libraries, museums, and cultural organizations play a key role in safeguarding this oral heritage.

Modern adaptations of african american folktales appear in children's books, theater productions, and digital media. These retellings maintain the spirit of the original stories while introducing them to new audiences and formats. The ongoing preservation and adaptation of these tales ensure their relevance for future generations.

Trending Questions and Answers about African American Folktales

Q: What are african american folktales?

A: African American folktales are traditional stories passed down orally within African American communities. They blend African, Native American, and European influences, often conveying cultural values, moral lessons, and historical experiences.

Q: Who is Br'er Rabbit in african american folktales?

A: Br'er Rabbit is a clever trickster character featured in many african american folktales. He uses intelligence and cunning to overcome obstacles, reflecting the value of wit and resourcefulness.

Q: Why are trickster characters important in african american folklore?

A: Trickster characters like Br'er Rabbit symbolize resilience and adaptability. They use cleverness to challenge authority and survive adversity, embodying the spirit of resistance found in african american history.

Q: How were african american folktales traditionally shared?

A: These folktales were primarily shared through oral storytelling, often during gatherings, celebrations, and family events. Storytellers used performance, music, and audience participation to bring the stories to life.

Q: What themes are common in african american folktales?

A: Common themes include survival, resistance, freedom, cleverness, and justice. The stories often teach moral lessons or offer social commentary.

Q: Which authors are known for collecting african american folktales?

A: Zora Neale Hurston and Joel Chandler Harris are notable authors who collected, preserved, and published african american folktales, helping to share these stories with wider audiences.

Q: What is a conjure tale in african american folklore?

A: A conjure tale is a type of african american folktale that includes elements of magic, spirits, and supernatural powers, often drawing from African spiritual traditions.

Q: How have african american folktales influenced American culture?

A: These folktales have influenced literature, music, and art across the United States, inspiring writers, musicians, and artists while helping shape the country's cultural identity.

Q: Why is it important to preserve african american folktales?

A: Preserving african american folktales helps maintain cultural heritage, pass down valuable lessons, and ensure future generations understand the history and traditions of African American communities.

Q: Are african american folktales still relevant today?

A: Yes, african american folktales remain relevant as they continue to teach important values, celebrate cultural identity, and inspire new generations through literature, art, and digital media.

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Delving into the Rich Tapestry of African American Folktales

Introduction:

Step into a world brimming with vibrant characters, captivating stories, and enduring wisdom. African American folktales, a rich legacy passed down through generations, offer a window into the history, culture, and resilience of the African diaspora. This post will delve into the captivating narratives, exploring their origins, themes, prominent figures like Brer Rabbit, and the significant impact they've had on American literature and culture. We'll uncover the power of these stories to entertain, educate, and preserve cultural identity, ultimately revealing why understanding African American folktales is crucial to understanding a significant part of American history.

The Origins and Evolution of African American Folktales

African American folktales didn't emerge in a vacuum. Their roots lie deep within the rich oral traditions of West Africa, brought to the Americas through the brutal transatlantic slave trade. These stories, often told in the fields, during evenings around campfires, or whispered between generations, served multiple purposes. They provided solace during times of hardship, subtly conveyed resistance to oppression, and preserved cultural memory in the face of systematic attempts to erase African heritage. Over time, these tales adapted and evolved, incorporating elements of American life and creating unique forms of expression. This process of adaptation, a testament to the dynamism of oral tradition, is what makes African American folktales so fascinating and diverse.

The Power of Oral Tradition

The oral nature of these stories is paramount. Passed down through generations, each telling subtly altered the narrative, adding personal touches and reflecting the changing socio-political landscape. This constant evolution ensured that the stories remained relevant and engaging, adapting to the needs and experiences of each new generation. Unlike written texts, oral traditions allowed for a fluidity and flexibility, making them incredibly resilient and adaptable forms of cultural transmission.

Recurring Themes and Archetypes in African American Folktales

Several key themes and archetypes consistently emerge within African American folktales. These recurring motifs offer valuable insights into the worldview and experiences of the people who created and passed down these narratives.

Trickster Figures: The Cleverness of the Underdog

One of the most prominent figures is the trickster, often embodying cunning and resourcefulness in the face of adversity. Brer Rabbit, perhaps the most well-known example, frequently outsmarts stronger, more powerful opponents like Brer Fox and Brer Bear. These narratives often celebrate cleverness and resilience, highlighting how the seemingly weak can overcome powerful oppressors through wit and ingenuity. This resonates deeply with the historical struggles faced by African Americans.

Animal Characters and Symbolism

Animals frequently serve as symbolic representations of human characteristics and societal dynamics. The characteristics attributed to these animals—the cunning of the rabbit, the strength of the bear, the slyness of the fox—reflect societal power structures and the strategies employed to navigate them. These allegorical representations add layers of meaning, making the stories engaging and intellectually stimulating.

Themes of Freedom, Resistance, and Perseverance

Underlying many African American folktales is a powerful theme of freedom and resistance. Though often told subtly, these narratives often served as coded messages of hope and resistance during slavery. They provided a sense of agency and empowerment, fostering a spirit of perseverance in the face of unimaginable hardship. The enduring legacy of these tales underscores the strength and resilience of the African American spirit.

The Influence of African American Folktales on American Culture

The influence of African American folktales extends far beyond their immediate communities. These narratives have significantly impacted American literature, music, and art, enriching the cultural fabric of the nation. They have inspired countless works of fiction, film, and music, influencing storytelling styles and themes across various creative mediums. The enduring power of these stories speaks volumes about their relevance and resonance in contemporary society.

Modern Adaptations and Retellings

Today, authors and artists continue to adapt and reinterpret these folktales, ensuring their survival and relevance in modern times. Contemporary retellings often address current social and political issues, showcasing the ongoing relevance of the themes and challenges faced by the communities that gave rise to these powerful narratives. This demonstrates the timeless appeal and enduring

power of African American folktales.

Conclusion

African American folktales represent a vibrant and powerful testament to the resilience, ingenuity, and cultural richness of the African diaspora. These narratives, passed down through generations, provide a captivating glimpse into a history often overlooked or misrepresented. By understanding and appreciating these stories, we gain a deeper understanding of the struggles, triumphs, and enduring cultural legacy of African Americans, enriching our collective understanding of American history and culture.

FAQs

1. Are all African American folktales about Brer Rabbit? No, while Brer Rabbit is a prominent figure, many other characters and storylines populate the rich tapestry of African American folktales. These stories encompass a wide range of characters and themes.
2. Where can I find more examples of African American folktales? You can find numerous collections in libraries, bookstores, and online archives. Searching for specific titles or authors focused on African American folklore will yield many results.
3. How are African American folktales different from other folk tales? While sharing some similarities with other folk tales, African American folktales are distinguished by their unique historical context, the incorporation of elements of African culture, and their often-subtle but powerful themes of resistance and perseverance.
4. Are these stories only relevant to African American communities? No, these stories offer valuable insights into the human condition, exploring universal themes of struggle, perseverance, and the importance of cultural identity. Their lessons resonate with individuals from all backgrounds.
5. How can I contribute to the preservation of African American folktales? Support organizations dedicated to preserving oral traditions, share these stories with others, and encourage their study and appreciation in schools and communities. Active engagement helps ensure their legacy for future generations.

african american folktales: The Annotated African American Folktales (The Annotated Books) Henry Louis Gates Jr., Maria Tatar, 2017-11-14 Winner • NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work (Fiction) Winner • Anne Izard Storytellers' Choice Award Holiday Gift Guide Selection • Indiewire, San Francisco Chronicle, and Minneapolis Star-Tribune These nearly 150 African American folktales animate our past and reclaim a lost cultural legacy to redefine American literature. Drawing from the great folklorists of the past while expanding African

American lore with dozens of tales rarely seen before, *The Annotated African American Folktales* revolutionizes the canon like no other volume. Following in the tradition of such classics as Arthur Huff Fauset's "Negro Folk Tales from the South" (1927), Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935), and Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly* (1985), acclaimed scholars Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Maria Tatar assemble a groundbreaking collection of folktales, myths, and legends that revitalizes a vibrant African American past to produce the most comprehensive and ambitious collection of African American folktales ever published in American literary history. Arguing for the value of these deceptively simple stories as part of a sophisticated, complex, and heterogeneous cultural heritage, Gates and Tatar show how these remarkable stories deserve a place alongside the classic works of African American literature, and American literature more broadly. Opening with two introductory essays and twenty seminal African tales as historical background, Gates and Tatar present nearly 150 African American stories, among them familiar Brer Rabbit classics, but also stories like "The Talking Skull" and "Witches Who Ride," as well as out-of-print tales from the 1890s' *Southern Workman*. Beginning with the figure of Anansi, the African trickster, master of improvisation—a spider who plots and weaves in scandalous ways—*The Annotated African American Folktales* then goes on to draw Caribbean and Creole tales into the orbit of the folkloric canon. It retrieves stories not seen since the Harlem Renaissance and brings back archival tales of "Negro folklore" that Booker T. Washington proclaimed had emanated from a "grapevine" that existed even before the American Revolution, stories brought over by slaves who had survived the Middle Passage. Furthermore, Gates and Tatar's volume not only defines a new canon but reveals how these folktales were hijacked and misappropriated in previous incarnations, egregiously by Joel Chandler Harris, a Southern newspaperman, as well as by Walt Disney, who cannibalized and capitalized on Harris's volumes by creating cartoon characters drawn from this African American lore. Presenting these tales with illuminating annotations and hundreds of revelatory illustrations, *The Annotated African American Folktales* reminds us that stories not only move, entertain, and instruct but, more fundamentally, inspire and keep hope alive. *The Annotated African American Folktales* includes: Introductory essays, nearly 150 African American stories, and 20 seminal African tales as historical background The familiar Brer Rabbit classics, as well as news-making vernacular tales from the 1890s' *Southern Workman* An entire section of Caribbean and Latin American folktales that finally become incorporated into the canon Approximately 200 full-color, museum-quality images

african american folktales: *African American Folktales* Roger Abrahams, 2011-07-27 Full of life, wisdom, and humor, these tales range from the earthy comedy of tricksters to accounts of how the world was created and got to be the way it is to moral fables that tell of encounters between masters and slaves. They include stories set down in nineteenth-century travelers' reports and plantation journals, tales gathered by collectors such as Joel Chandler Harris and Zora Neale Hurston, and narratives tape-recorded by Roger Abrahams himself during extensive expeditions throughout the American South and the Caribbean. With black-and-white illustrations throughout Part of the Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library

african american folktales: Her Stories Virginia Hamilton, 1995 Nineteen stories focus on the magical lore and wondrous imaginings of African American women.

african american folktales: African Folktales Roger Abrahams, 2011-08-03 The deep forest and broad savannah, the campsites, kraals, and villages—from this immense area south of the Sahara Desert the distinguished American folklorist Roger D. Abrahams has selected ninety-five tales that suggest both the diversity and the interconnectedness of the people who live there. The storytellers weave imaginative myths of creation and tales of epic deeds, chilling ghost stories, and ribald tales of mischief and magic in the animal and human realms. Abrahams renders these stories in a narrative voice that reverberates with the rhythms of tribal song and dance and the emotional language of universal concerns. With black-and-white drawings throughout Part of the Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library

african american folktales: *African-American Folktales for Young Readers* Richard Young, Judy Dockrey Young, 1993 A collection of folktales from the African-American oral tradition,

presented as they have been told by professional black storytellers from Rhode Island to Oklahoma.

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but for a love of the sunny country where he was born. Some stories originate from Dutch sources, and some have several versions. Most are tales told by the bushmen.

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african american folktales: **Gullah Folktales from the Georgia Coast** Charles Colcock Jones, 2012-03-15 In 1888, Charles Colcock Jones Jr. published the first collection of folk narratives from the Gullah-speaking people of the South Atlantic coast, tales he heard black servants exchange on his family's rice and cotton plantation. It has been out of print and largely unavailable until now. Jones saw the stories as a coastal variation of Joel Chandler Harris's inland dialect tales and sought to preserve their unique language and character. Through Jones' rendering of the sound and syntax of nineteenth-century Gullah, the lively stories describe the adventures and mishaps of such characters as Buh Rabbit, Buh Ban-Yad Rooster, and other animals. The tales range from the humorous to the instructional and include stories of the sperits, Daddy Jupiter's vision, a dying bullfrog's last wish, and others about how buh rabbit gained sense and why the turkey buzzard won't eat crabs.

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african american folktales: **Mirandy and Brother Wind** Patricia McKissack, 2013-06-26 Illus. in full color. Mirandy is sure she'll win the cake walk if she can catch Brother Wind for her partner, but he eludes all the tricks her friends advise. This gets a high score for plot, pace, and characterization. Mirandy sparkles with energy and determination. Multi-hued watercolors fill the pages with patterned ferment. A treat to pass on to new generations.--(starred) Bulletin, Center for Children's Books. Cassette running time: 20 min.

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and pre-Columbian America, the stories brought together here represent a core collection of classic Latin American folktales. Among the essential characters are the quiet man's wife who knew the Devil's secrets, the three daughters who robbed their father's grave, and the wife in disguise who married her own husband—not to mention the Bear's son, the tricksters Fox and Monkey, the two compadres, and the classic rogue Pedro de Urdemalas. Featuring black-and-white illustrations throughout, this Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library edition is unprecedented in size and scope, including riddles, folk prayers, and fables never before translated into English.

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african american folktales: American Trickster Emily Zobel Marshall, 2019-06-18 Our fascination with the trickster figure, whose presence is global, stems from our desire to break free from the tightly regimented structures of our societies. Condemned to conform to laws and rules imposed by governments, communities, social groups and family bonds, we revel in the fantasy of the trickster whose energy and cunning knows no bounds and for whom nothing is sacred. One such trickster is Brer Rabbit, who was introduced to North America through the folktales of enslaved Africans. On the plantations, Brer Rabbit, like Anansi in the Caribbean, functioned as a resistance figure for the enslaved whose trickery was aimed at undermining and challenging the plantation regime. Yet as Brer Rabbit tales moved from the oral tradition to the printed page in the late nineteenth-century, the trickster was emptied of his potentially powerful symbolism by white American collectors, authors and folklorists in their attempt to create a nostalgic fantasy of the plantation past. *American Trickster* offers readers a unique insight into the cultural significance of the Brer Rabbit trickster figure, from his African roots and through to his influence on contemporary culture. Exploring the changing portrayals of the trickster figure through a wealth of cultural forms including folktales, advertising, fiction and films the book scrutinises the profound tensions between the perpetuation of damaging racial stereotypes and the need to keep African-American folk traditions alive. Emily Zobel Marshall argues that Brer Rabbit was eventually reclaimed by twentieth-century African-American novelists whose protagonists 'trick' their way out of limiting stereotypes, break down social and cultural boundaries and offer readers practical and psychological methods for challenging the traumatic legacies of slavery and racism.

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contributors—consisting of classroom teachers, community workers, and adult educators—present units and lesson plans that challenge the Eurocentricity of curriculum design while also having practical applicability within various North American curricular models. These curriculum designs make space for students' lived experiences inside the classroom and amplify critical social values, such as community building, social justice, equity, fairness, resistance, and collective responsibility, thereby addressing the issue of youth disengagement and promoting productive inclusion. Rich with sample units and lessons that are grounded in African oral traditions, this ground-breaking resource features critical guiding questions, suggestions for ongoing and culminating classroom activities, templates and resources, and notes to the teacher. *Centering African Proverbs, Indigenous Folktales, and Cultural Stories in Curriculum* is an essential tool for practising teachers, professional learning providers, and students in education and teaching programs across Canada and the United States.

african american folktales: A Story, a Story Gail E. Haley, 1970-02-01 Many African stories, whether or not they are about Kwaku Ananse the spider man, are called, Spider Stories. This book is about how that came to be. The African storyteller begins: We do not really mean, we do not really mean that what we are about to say is true. A Story, a story; let it come, let it go. And it tells that long, long ago there were no stories on earth for children to hear. All stories belonged to Nyame, the Sky God. Ananse, the Spider man, wanted to buy some of these stories, so he spun a web up to the sky and went up to bargain with the Sky God. The price the Sky God asked was Osebo, the leopard of-the-terrible-teeth, Mmboro the hornet who-stings-like-fire, and Mmoatia the fairy whom-men-never-see. How Ananse paid the price is told in a graceful and clever text, with forceful, lovely woodcut illustrations.

african american folktales: The Conjure Woman (new edition) Charles W. Chesnutt, 2024-10-22 An early slave narrative, a skilfully woven satire on the stereotypes of plantation life and the apparently beneficent white owner. Told as a series of gentle fables, in the style of Aesop. Featuring a new introduction for this new edition, *The Conjure Woman* is probably Chesnutt's most powerful work, a collection of stories set in post-war North Carolina. The main character is Uncle Julius, a former slave, who entertains a white couple from the North with fantastic tales of antebellum plantation life. Julius tells of supernatural phenomenon, hauntings, transfiguration, and conjuring, which were typical of Southern African-American folk tales at the time. Uncle Julius tells the stories in a way that speaks beyond his immediate audience, offering stories of slavery and inequality that are, to the enlightened reader, obviously wrong. The tales are fabulistic, like those of Uncle Remus or Aesop, with carefully crafted allegories on the psychological and social effects of slavery and racial injustice. *Foundations of Black Science Fiction*. New forewords and fresh introductions give long-overdue perspectives on significant, early Black proto-sci-fi and speculative fiction authors who wrote with natural justice and civil rights in their hearts, their voices reaching forward to the writers of today. The series foreword is by Dr Sandra Grayson.

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african american folktales: Sukey and the Mermaid Robert D. San Souci, 2013-10-29 Storyteller say, This happened oncet upon a time, on a little island off the coast of South Carolina. A girl named Sukey lived with her ma and new step-pa. Sukey called her step-pa Mister Hard-Times. Every day, while he watched, she hoed the weeds in the garden and every day, she sang: Mister Hard-Times, Since you come My ma don't like me, My work never done. But one morning, when her step-pa wasn't looking, Sukey ran away to her secret hiding place by the sea and unwittingly called up Mama Jo, a beautiful black mermaid. The adventures that followed changed her life forever. In this dream-woven story, artfully retold by Robert D. San Souci from an American folktale, a poor girl finds her wishes answered not by treasure, or the sea's magic, but by goodness and love.

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the Caribbean, re-told for young readers. From the trickster tales of Anansi the spider, to the story of how the leopard got his spots; from the tale of the king who wanted to touch the moon, to Aunt Misery's magical starfruit tree. This book includes traditional favourites and classic folktales and mythology.

african american folktales: Uncle Remus Joel Chandler Harris, 2015-06-12 Animal Stories, Songs and Folklore from the American South “You can't run away from trouble. Ain't no place that far.” — Uncle Remus, Joel Chandler Harris Uncle Remus is a collection of African-American stories, songs and oral folklore collected by Joel Chandler Harris. Uncle Remus is a fictional storyteller who shares stories about Br'er Rabbit, a trickster who is often opposed by Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear. Uncle Remus was adapted in the controversial Disney film, The Song of the South and the story characters are still feature in the Disney ride, Splash Mountain. This Xist Classics edition has been professionally formatted for e-readers with a linked table of contents. This eBook also contains a bonus book club leadership guide and discussion questions. We hope you'll share this book with your friends, neighbors and colleagues and can't wait to hear what you have to say about it.

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