CHARACTERISTICS OF SOME FIRST NATIONS STORIES

A First Nation Story may:

• contain four events (Four is powerful and important for some First Nations, e.g., four seasons, four winds, four directions, four stages of life, four colours of human skin);

• reflect life and/or nature;

• be based on facts and truths;

• begin in the past to explain an event or teach a lesson about how people should behave;

• involve the changes of the inner spirit;

• involve a character called Trickster who is part human and part spirit and is able to turn into other forms (e.g., Northwest Coast - Raven; Plains - Coyote).
<table>
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<th>TITLE AUTHOR</th>
<th>FIRST NATION</th>
<th>LIST CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LEGEND / STORY</th>
<th>WHAT LESSON DOES THIS LEGEND / STORY TEACH?</th>
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| Two-Finned Whale Retold by Shannon Thunderbird | Tsimshian (Pacific Coast) | - facts about Orcas:  
1. black and white  
2. breathe air  
3. have a distinct song  
4. two fins  
5. travel in groups  
6. protects each other’s young  
- begins in the past - Orcas were land animals and kin (related to) wolves  
- explains why Orcas are black and white and live in oceans today  
- connection to life / nature; Mother Earth; Grandfather Sky; thunder; ocean; trees  
- Orcas changed from the spirit of wolves | We must respect and appreciate our origins and heritage.  
We are all the same in some way.  
The story points out the similarities between the Orca and the Wolf.  
Although the Orca changed over time, the similarities with the Wolf remained.  
All living things may change but we must live peacefully as one. |
WHY MOUSE IS SO SMALL

Once, a very long time ago, when Raven was at his busiest helping Manitou build the world, he went to a potlatch with Eagle, Gull, Owl and a lot of other birds and animals, large and small. The topic that became the main theme of the potlatch was about why everything came in different sizes.

“I like them small”, said Owl when it was his turn to take the Talking Stick, “because it helps me to eat and swallow.” All the smaller creatures shivered and hid under bushes, peeping out from time to time to see if Owl had reached his hungry stage.

Gull stood up and said, “Same here. Clams and small fish suit me just fine.”

Eagle took the Talking Stick from Gull. “I can handle middle sizes well. But sometimes I catch a big salmon in my big talons and do my best not to drop it anywhere near Bear.” The others laughed and Bear chuckled good-naturedly.

Then suddenly there was a squeak from nearby. Mouse, quivering with fear, crept out from under her safe bush and said, “I have s-something to s-say.” She glanced fearfully up at Owl.

“Say on, Brother Mouse”, said Raven magnanimously. “Today is a special day and we will not give you away in the potlatch!” Everybody rocked with friendly laughter.

“Well”, said Mouse, venturing a little further into the circle. Eagle gently laid the Talking Stick in front of Mouse because everyone knows that a little mouse has her limitations when it comes to holding up things. “I am small and all of you are big and it seems to me that there is a plan behind that matter. It has to do with the nature of each of us. Like Rabbit, I am easily frightened, so much so that both of us can die from fright. But, do you not think that this is a thing for you to see and understand? I don’t think Rabbit agrees with me, but I keep getting a feeling that my timidity and my smallness, being a part of my nature given to me by Manitou, means that I must recognize my mission in the world.”

“And, what is that, Miss?” enquired Owl curiously.

“To provide sustenance for you, Brother”, replied Mouse very quietly. “You were made to live on such as me, just as Eagle was made to live on fish as well as small land creatures and Gull was given the ability to open clams for his meal.”

Everyone remained silent contemplating the words of Mouse. For once, even Raven was quiet and thoughtful. Presently, Raven spoke:
“We have learned a lesson today”, he said, looking around at the assembly. “A lesson in humility. Let us never forget to think of this when we go back to our everyday life. Let us sing a song to Manitou in which we say our thanks, not only for this lesson, but in praise of the courage of Mouse and all other small creatures made with love by Manitou.”

They all stood up and began to dance the dance of thanksgiving, circle within circle, smaller creatures within and greater ones without. That day they fasted and sang and danced until the sun went down.

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**TWO-FINNED WHALE**

*Tsimshian Nation - Northwest Coast*

It is often said that orcas were once land-based animals because their culture was so close to that of the wolf. Orcas travel in groups and protect and look after each other’s young. They teach by singing their world to their young. It has even been said that the orca was once a snow white wolf, but when the Creator decided that the snow white wolf should go below the great waters and become a whale, Creator left some white markings in order to remind whale of its original world. When Orca surfaces to breathe, this is also a reminder of its original origin. Orca comes to the surface and blows air through its blowhole. This sound calls to its land-based family, the wolves, who howl back recognition of their kin.

As Orca descended into the ocean, Creator gave some of them the responsibility of recording and carrying the history of the world. These special Orcas were given two fins. One fin was used to hold the knowledge of the world; the other fin was part of Orca’s physical body.

These two-finned whales were also given a special song that they sang when they were called to speak of Mother Earth’s history. This song could be heard across the waters great and small. All life below the waters would dance to the sound; the animals of the world would respond with their own songs; the Standing People (trees) would sway and stretch their branches toward the water; as Orca surfaced, the great west wind would come and assist in carrying the knowledge to all parts of Mother Earth; the thunder beings would roll the same message across Grandfather Sky: “We are one People. All living things must live as one People. Heya-Ho.”

Text shared, via e-mail, by Shannon Thunderbird.
LEGEND OF THE DREAMCATCHER

Long ago when the world was young, an old Lakota spiritual leader was on a high mountain and had a vision. In his vision, Iktomi, the great Trickster and teacher of wisdom, appeared in the form of a spider.

Iktomi spoke to him in a sacred language that only the spiritual leaders of the Lakota could understand. As he spoke Iktomi, the spider, took the elders willow hoop which had feathers, horse hairs, beads and offerings on it and began to spin a web.

He spoke to the elder about the cycles of life.... how we begin our lives as infants and we move on to childhood, and then to adulthood. Finally we go to old age where we must be taken care of as infants, completing the cycle.

Iktomi said, “In each time of life there are many forces and different directions that can help or interfere with the harmony of nature, and also with the Great Spirit and all of his wonderful teachings.”

Iktomi gave the web to the Lakota elder and said, “See, the web is a perfect circle but there is a hole in the center of the circle. If you believe in the great spirit, the web will catch your good dreams and ideas and the bad ones will go through the hole. Use the web to help yourself and your people to reach your goals and make good use of your people’s ideas, dreams and visions.”

The Lakota elder passed on his vision to his people and now the Lakota’s use the Dreamcatcher as the web of their life. It is hung above their beds or in their home to sift their dreams and visions. The good of their dreams is captured in the web of life and carried with them but the evil in their dreams escapes through the centre hole and are no longer part of them.

Although Dreamcatchers are made by a variety of people and Native North Americans, and although there are many stories and legends, the Ojibway originated them.

Dreamcatchers made of willow and sinew were for children and they were not meant to last. Eventually the willow dried out and the sinew collapsed the Dreamcatcher. That was supposed to happen to represent the temporary nature of youth. Adults had Dreamcatchers of woven fiber to reflect their adult dreams.

Dreamcatchers must always have a large enough hole in the centre for good dreams to go through!

According to Ojibway legend, Dreamcatchers were originally hung over a baby’s cradle. Dreams were considered messages from the spirit world. The good dreams, being smart, would find their way through the centre hole and float down the sacred feathers onto the sleeping one. The bad spirit dreams would get caught in the web and disappear with the morning light. Dreamcatchers are believed to bestow
pleasant dreams, good luck, and lifetime harmony.