

Tales from Silver Lands Short Guide

Tales from Silver Lands by Charles J. Finger

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Overview

Tales from Silver Lands is a collection of nineteen folktales, which Finger collected during his travels in South America. In them an assortment of animals, magical creatures, witches, giants, and children struggle for a life in which good overcomes evil. These fastmoving and adventuresome fantasies provide insight into the values and culture of native South American peoples.

They stress the importance of close relationships, hard work, bravery, gentleness, and beauty, and contain colorful explanations of natural phenomena.

About the Author

Charles Joseph Finger was born on December 25, 1869, in Willesdon, England, to Charles H. and Julia Connolly Finger. He attended King's College in London and studied music at Frankfurt-am-Main in Germany. He emigrated to the United States in 1887 and became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1896.

During his late teens, Finger sailed around the world on a merchant ship, following the route taken by Magellan.

He traveled widely throughout Africa and spent years exploring South America, where he served as a guide for ornithological expeditions.

After returning to the United States, Finger took the post of director at the Conservatory of Music in San Angelo, Texas. On June 7, 1902, he married Nellie B. Ferguson. But his love for adventure and travel persisted, and in 1905 he set out for Alaska in search of gold as a manager of the Klondike Gold Fields. On his return he became a general manager for the Ohio Southeastern System of Railroads and remained with the company from 1906 to 1920.

At this point in his life, Finger's interest turned to writing. He moved to a farm in the Ozark Mountains, near Fayetteville, Arkansas, to write and spend time with his five children. He attended Knox College, where he received his doctor of literature degree in 1921. He edited a poetry anthology, *The Choice of the Crowd*, in 1922, and wrote short stories and songs. He also produced his own one-man magazine, *All's Well*, which he published from 1920 to 1935. Finger received a doctor of laws degree from the University of Arkansas in 1931.

Finger was the author of thirty-five books, including books for children, adventure stories, biographies, historical romances, folktales, collections of ballads, travel books, and novels. He won the 1925 Newbery Medal for his collection of folktales, *Tales from Silver Lands*, and he received the Longmans, Green and Company Prize in 1929 for best adventure story for *Courageous Companions*, a historical romance about a boy who sailed around the world with Magellan. His children's book, *Give a Man a Horse* (1937), was chosen an Honor Book by the 1938 New York Herald Tribune's Spring Book Festival.

Finger became managing editor for Bellows-Reeve Company in Chicago in 1936 and worked as an editor for Newbery Press. He died of a heart attack on January 8, 1941, near Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Setting

The Tales from Silver Lands are set in South America during the turn of the century, although many of the stories appear to be timeless legends no doubt passed from generation to generation.

Many of the individual tales are set in a specific country or region, including Bolivia, Brazil, Cape Horn, Colombia, Guiana, Honduras, and Uruguay. Some stories are set in the forest, and others take place at the seashore or in the mountains. All demonstrate a close relationship to nature and portray a land in which magic and illusion are accepted aspects of life.



Social Sensitivity

Readers of Tales from Silver Lands will find a stereotypical view of women. According to these stories, females are to be protected and cannot be expected to become rulers even if they are intelligent and wise. Their job is to sew, cook, and make a home for their families. The ideal woman is pictured as beautiful and kind; this is expressed by the hummingbird, who says: "No one wants a flower to be wise. To be beautiful is enough."

Such attitudes are authentic to the native South American cultures of the time and express an attitude towards women that was prevalent in much of the world in the early 1900s. Stereotyped standards for the ideal male are also a part of almost every story—to be a "man" is to be handsome, strong, skillful, brave, and hard-working.

Readers may find several of the tales to be gruesome and unpleasant in their descriptions of death and fighting. The stories of the Hero Twins and the Four Hundred Boys as they face the wicked giants are perhaps the most explicit in their descriptions of battles. Most of the tales, however, stress gentleness and peace as virtues to be preferred over violence and cruelty.

Literary Qualities

Finger relates the Tales from Silver Lands in the style of mythical folk stories, told with a definite South American flavor. He uses a number of Spanish terms, such as calling a nightmare a *pesadilla*. In "The Tale of the Lazy People" he uses Spanish alphabetical listings of the kinds of work to be done by the carved manikins. He employs richly detailed, colorful descriptions. His characters have vivid, unusual names, such as Hunbatz the Wizard; Borac, the baby found in a basket; the fearful giants Cabrakan and Cakik; or the greedy El Enano.

Finger narrates the stories in a conversational tone, in a way that an aged tribal leader might have told them in front of a campfire. Some of the stories are told in the first person, while others are third-person accounts of ancient legends. Frequently a tale will begin in the first person, then change to the third person for a story-within-a-story.

Finger often employs the interesting literary device of short, rhythmic, and rhyming verses in the stories. These are repeated several times and often contain a riddle to be solved or a clue to the meaning of the story. These are usually included as songs sung by the characters.

Finger also incorporates short moral sayings into his stories as a method of teaching values to the young. These moral sayings include such comments as "tasks are easier when all share part of the weight" or "little things left undone become big things."

"The Humming-Bird and the Flower" is the only tale in the collection written entirely in dialogue. There are no descriptions or comments that are not spoken in conversation, and the story could easily be performed as a short play.

Finger adds personal touches to many of the stories, with such comments as "my daughter likes this story best," or a warning that "this is a scary story—stop reading it if you think you will become afraid." He also adds to the feeling of Tales from Silver Lands authenticity by saying, "if you do not believe me, just look and see for yourself."

Themes and Characters

The Tales from Silver Lands are stories of hope and optimism. They recall a golden age and assure the reader that times of peace, gentleness, and kindness are still possible. They address questions such as what the source of evil in the world is, and whether there is any possibility that good will ultimately triumph. The stories also treat the order and beauty of nature, the dangers of illusion and wishes, and the necessity of facing challenges with courage and creativity. Several of the stories are explanations of why certain animals look or act as they do.

Although most of the tales in Tales from Silver Lands have their own unique characters, there are many similarities among them. Each story, with the exception of "The Humming-Bird and the Flower," has a child or youth as one of the main characters. These children frequently face challenges and riddles, and are often shown in relationship to their fathers or mothers. They represent positive qualities such as bravery, ingenuity, wisdom and kindness.

Almost every story also has a character who personifies evil. This character might be a wizard or witch, a fearful giant, a wicked stepmother, or a dreamman. Some of the evil characters are animals, such as the owl, a doubleheaded toad, a serpent, or a cat. Others are men or women who have been temporarily bewitched, or persons who are thoughtless or lazy.

The tales also contain animals who are helpful, wise, and good, as well as magical persons who are kind and exhibit positive virtues such as peace, gentleness, and self-sacrifice. Several tales tell of a band of four hundred boys who personify bravery, skill, and the strength and loyalty of friendship.



Topics for Discussion

1. How is the rhyme: "I must do what I can/ Is the thought of a man" related to the theme of "A Tale of Three Tails"?

Do you think it is reasonable to keep working, even when tasks appear hopeless? Why or why not?

2. Describe Maconahola's character in "The Magic Dog." Why is Tlapa, the witch, angry with him?

3. According to "Na-Ha the Fighter," what is "the way of the white death"?

What are some of the physical characteristics of seals which appear to be explained by this tale?

4. Why is El Enano, the creature who never has enough to eat, able to destroy the good old woman's house? According to the fox, why does the old woman's kindness not offset El Enano's greed?

5. In "The Magic Knot," Borac needs only a tiny thread with a knot and one magic feather to bind the great black bird. What does the bird symbolize?

What does the thread symbolize? The feather? What does this story have to say about courage?

6. In "The Bad Wishers," the old man says: "Wishing never does, but help does much and many can help one." What does he mean? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

7. How does Stout Heart's dream in "The Hungry Old Witch" correspond to what happens to him during the story? What does each part of the dream symbolize?

8. What does "The Tale of the Lazy People" say about the value of work? Do you think the author is being sarcastic when he says men who do not have to work at menial tasks "keep their brains free for higher things"? Why or why not?

9. According to the tale of "Rairu and the Star Maiden," how might humanity benefit by being more like the stars?

How does Rairu's appreciation of beauty both help and hurt him?

10. When the wise old woman hears Nasca's plan for racing the cat in "The Cat and the Dream Man," she says: "To a cat her cattishness, but to a woman her wit. All falls out well enough." What does she mean? How would you describe the meaning of "cattishness"? How do you think Nasca and the old woman would define wisdom?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. According to the tales in *Tales from Silver Lands*, what is the source of evil in the world, and why does it exist? Will evil last forever? Is there any hope that good will ultimately overcome evil? Why or why not?
2. Many of the tales in this book tell how characters are put to tests or challenges. Compare the types of tests with the manner in which these challenges are faced. Why do you think tests are such a common part of folktales? How do the tests described in *Tales from Silver Lands* compare to challenges found in other well-known folktales and fairy tales?
3. Using the descriptions found in these tales, describe what Finger might consider a "perfect" world. Do you think such a world is a possibility? Why or why not? How does his image of a perfect world compare with your personal idea of perfection?
4. Compare the wicked characters found in these tales. In what ways are they similar? What is the source of their wickedness? What is the source of their strength? How can you tell the difference between the magic that brings evil and the magic that can be used for good purposes?
5. Animals and nature play a large role in Finger's stories. Describe what this role is. Make a list of the major animals found in these stories, and note the human characteristics that each symbolizes.

For Further Reference

Finger, Charles J. *Seven Horizons*. New York: Doubleday, 1930. This autobiography describes Finger's true-life adventures.

Leflar, Helen Finger. "Biographical Note." In *Newbery Medal Books: 1922-1955*, edited by Bertha Mahony Miller and Elinor Whitney Field. Boston: Horn Book, 1955. Finger's youngest daughter describes memories and impressions of her father.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Finger has written other collections of folktales. *Tales Worth Telling* and *Golden Tales from Far Away* contain stories gathered on his travels around the world, including those from Africa, Norway, Ireland, and Mexico; they are similar in style to *Tales from Silver Lands*. A fourth book of folktales is Finger's *Paul Banyan Geography* (1931), a collection of North American folktales.

Tales from Silver Lands has been adapted into two filmstrips by MillerBrody: "Tales from Silver Lands" (1972) and "The Magic Ball and Other Tales from Silver Lands" (1972). Miller-Brody has also published a sixteen-millimeter film of "The Tale of the Lazy People" (1976) and a recording of "The Calabash Man." In 1970 Newbery Award Records made a recording of *Tales from Silver Lands* that includes "The Magic Ball," "Na-Ha the Fighter," and "The Tale of the Lazy People."



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