

Fables in different cultures

[Literature](#), [Fiction](#)



Common type of story is the fable, which presents a moral, or lesson about human behavior. Fables usually feature animals behaving and speaking as humans. Among the most widely known are those from the ancient Sanskrit Pancatantra (Five Chapters), which was first written down in India perhaps 2,000 years ago. Known in Europe as The Fables of Bidpai, this collection presents animal characters in entertaining stories and poetry. Many European animal fables have at least in part descended from the Pancatantra. Among the most renowned Western fables are those attributed to Aesop, a (probably fictitious) slave from ancient Greece.

One of the best-known of Aesop's stories is "The Ant and the Grasshopper," which teaches the need to be industrious and save for the future during times of plenty. Stories that point out lessons are called fables. Nearly everyone knows the fable about the three little pigs. They leave home and go out into the world to make their fortunes. Of course, they have to build places in which to live. The first little pig makes his house of straw. The second little pig also takes things easily, building his house of sticks. The third little pig works hard and long to make a house of bricks—a good, sturdy house.

Along comes a wolf who blows down the houses of straw and sticks and eats the two lazy little pigs. All his huffing and puffing, however, cannot blow down the house of bricks. In this fable the three little pigs show human characteristics. Two little pigs are shiftless and meet an unhappy end through their own fault. The hard-working little pig earns the reward of a good life. History of fables In very early times people told stories in which animals talk. By their actions the animals show how foolish or wise people

can be. Folklore scholars think that fables probably originated among the Semitic peoples of the Middle East.

The tales spread to India and then west to Greece. Many fables go back to an ancient Sanskrit collection from India called 'Pancatantra' (Five Chapters). These stories were told and retold through many generations. Eventually they reached Greece. The Greeks added detail and action and made Aesop master of all the fables. The Romans translated Aesop's fables into Latin. They were translated into French in the 13th century. The first of many versions of the folktale of "Reynard the Fox" appeared in about the 12th century. Fables of Aesop's The greatest teller of fables was Aesop (see Aesop).

He was believed to be a slave in ancient Greece. His stories are simple moral lessons illustrated usually by the actions and speech of animals. Some of his best-known fables are "The Lion and the Mouse," "The Fox and the Stork," "The Hare and the Tortoise," "The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing," "The Fox and the Grapes," "The Frogs Desiring a King," and "The Shepherd Boy and the Wolf." In Aesop's "The Lion and the Mouse" the great, strong lion is tired of hunting. He lies down to sleep under a shady tree. A mouse runs over his face and awakens him.

The angry lion is about to crush the tiny mouse with his huge paw, but the mouse begs so hard to live that the lion lets him go. Some time later the lion is caught in a hunter's trap. He roars with surprise and fury. The little mouse recognizes the roar and races to the trap. He gnaws the ropes and sets the lion free. The powerful lion is grateful for the help that his tiny friend gave him. The king of beasts thinks to himself "Sometimes the weakest can help

the strongest. " Aesop's " The Fox and the Stork" shows that a tricky person does not always win. A fox invites a stork to dinner.

The fox serves soup in a shallow dish. The poor stork can wet only the end of his long narrow bill in the soup. The sly fox makes false apologies and laps up all the food. The stork pretends to be satisfied and invites the fox to dinner. When the fox comes a few days later, he finds the food served in a tall jar with a narrow neck. Down in the jar goes the stork's long bill. All the fox can do is lick his chops. This fable may have suggested the old proverb " he who laughs last laughs best. " Many proverbs and maxims are expressions of the wisdom found in fables.

Some of these sayings and the fables from which they come are listed after the " History of Fables" section. Fables by La Fontaine Another great teller of fables was Jean de La Fontaine (see La Fontaine). He wrote in France in the 17th century. La Fontaine based many of his fables on those of Aesop. In the writings of both men are " The Fox and the Crow," " The Dove and the Ant," " The Fox and the Grapes," " The Maid and the Pail of Milk," and " The Fox and the Stork. " Some of La Fontaine's titles vary slightly from Aesop's. " The Fox and the Crow" tells that a fox sees a crow with a piece of cheese in her beak settle in a tree. The fox wants the cheese. He looks up at the crow and says, " Good day, Mistress Crow. How well you look today! I feel sure that your voice must surpass that of other birds, just as your figure does. Let me hear you sing but one song so I may greet you as queen of the birds. " The crow begins to caw her best.

As soon as she opens her mouth, the piece of cheese falls to the ground and is snapped up by the fox. " That will do," he says. " That was all I wanted. In

exchange for your cheese, I'll give you a piece of advice for the future. Do not trust flatterers. Another of La Fontaine's fables is " The Animals Sick of the Plague. " The lion, who is king of the beasts, asks all the animals to confess their sins. The guiltiest will be sacrificed to save the rest. The lion begins by confessing that he has " devoured an appalling number of sheep" and " the shepherd, too. " Reynard the Fox defends the king. His plea is applauded by the lion's flatterers. Finally a poor donkey is sacrificed after he confesses that he has eaten grass on the monastery grounds. The moral of the tale is: " Thus do the courts acquit the strong and doom the weak as therefore wrong. "