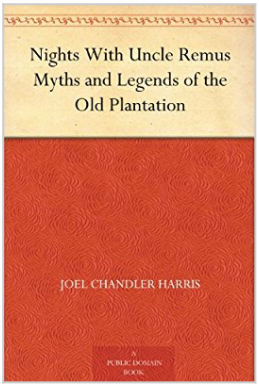

Nights With Uncle Remus Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation

By Joel Chandler Harris

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Editorial Review

About the Author
After the first book appeared in 1880, Joel Chandler Harris was deluged with letters from readers all over the country asking for more stories of Brer Rabbit and his friends--so for the remaining years of his life he collected and wrote them. Richard Chase, noted folklorist and author of Jack Tales and Grandfather Tales, compiled and edited the volume after Harris s death, and his occasional footnotes and word definitions contribute to our understanding of the dialect. Chase s belief in the importance of folktales and Harris s work is summed up in his foreword: "These tales grew up in the soil of our nation. They came from the soul of a people. They endure."

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NIGHTS WITH UNCLE REMUS

JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS was born in Eatonton, Georgia, in 1845. Setting type and learning to write under Joseph Addison Turner’s mentoring at nearby Turnwold Plantation, Harris later worked for newspapers in Macon and Forsyth. He served as Associate Editor for the *Savannah Morning News* (1870-1876) and for the *Atlanta Constitution* (1876-1900). Harris earned reputations as a literary comedian, a talented and resourceful amateur folklorist, a local-color fiction writer, a children’s author, and a major New South journalist. He wrote 185 Uncle Remus tales, seven volumes of short fiction, four novels and six collections of children’s stories. Harris’s portraits of poor whites and his socio-logically and rhetorically complex Brer Rabbit trickster stories have influenced generations of writers, from Mark Twain to Zora Neale Hurston, William Faulkner, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Julius Lester. Harris’s creation of highly animated, believably anthropomorphic animal characters also helped reinvent the modern children’s story, from Rudyard Kipling’s jungle tales to Beatrix Potter’s Peter Rabbit stories. Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby have also become popular culture icons. Harris died in 1908.

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Introduction

Folklore Performance and the Legacy of Joel Chandler Harris

In the summer of 1882, still flush with the popular and critical success of *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880), Joel Chandler Harris was waiting to catch a train in Norcross, Georgia, twenty miles northeast of Atlanta. Harris explains in detail the unique experience he had that night, and he made sure to include this important episode in his introduction to his second book, *Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation* (1883). The train was late, and darkness had already fallen when Harris overheard several black railroad workers sitting in small groups on the platform and perched on crossties, cracking jokes at each other's expense and laughing boisterously. Harris sat down next to one of the liveliest talkers in the group, a middle-aged worker. After enjoying their banter for awhile, Harris heard someone in the crowd mention "Ole Molly Har'." Suddenly inspired, and "in a low tone, as if to avoid attracting attention," Harris narrated the tar-baby story to his companion, "by way of a feeler."

Harris reconstructs in some detail what occurred next, a folkloristic event any ethnologist today would swap the SUV for. The lively man next to Harris kept interrupting the tar-baby narration with loud and frequent comments—"Dar now!" and "He's a honey, mon!" and "Gentermens! git out de way, an' gin 'im room!" Suddenly, Harris's audience of one grows exponentially into a storytelling community of thirty.

These comments, and the peals of unrestrained and unrestrainable laughter that accompanied them, drew the attention of the other Negroes, and before the climax of the story had been reached, where Brother Rabbit is cruelly thrown into the brier-patch, they had all gathered around and made themselves comfortable. Without waiting to see what the effect of the 'Tar Baby' legend would be, the writer [Harris] told the story of 'Brother Rabbit and the Mosquitoes,' and this had the effect of convulsing them. Two or three could hardly wait for the conclusion, so anxious were they to tell stories of their own. The result was that, for almost two hours, a crowd of thirty or more Negroes vied with each other to see which could tell the most and the best stories.

Harris notes that some of the black workers told stories poorly, "giving only meager outlines," while others "told them passing well." And then he adds that "one or two, if their language and gestures could have been taken down, would have put Uncle Remus to shame." Harris, always the astute observer, stresses that a storyteller's language and gestures must interact with the audience's emotions to create a truly memorable oral performance.

That evening, Harris goes on to explain, he heard a few stories he had already included among the thirty-four animal tales in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings.* He also heard several that he had previously "gathered and verified" but had not yet published. Yet "the great majority were either new or had been entirely forgotten." Then Harris shares an insight that reflects on the collective psyche of his fellow storytellers and, even more importantly, on his own conflicted self. Harris explains that the darkness that night "gave greater scope and freedom to the narratives of the negroes, and but for this friendly curtain, it is doubtful if the conditions would have been favorable to storytelling." Furthermore, "however favorable the conditions might have been, the appearance of a note-book and pencil would have dissipated them as utterly as if they had never existed."

Like a professional folklorist, which he never claimed to be, Harris knew the inhibiting effects on his human sources of introducing the reporter's pad in a natural, unforced, oral-performance setting. Gifted with a

remarkably discriminating ear and auditory memory, however, Harris carried off the Norcross stories in his head as surely as he had stored away the Middle Georgia black folk tales he had heard from Aunt Crissy, Old Harbert, and Uncle George Terrell while he worked as a printer's devil at Turnwold Plantation, outside Eatonton, in the mid-1860s. A decade later, when the *Atlanta Constitution*'s staff local colorist had taken a leave of absence, Harris had filled in for him. His memory banks had opened up, and out hopped brash Brer Rabbit, aided and abetted by his sly raconteur Uncle Remus—whom critics have proven to be as much the trickster as his wily folk hero.

Harris had named Uncle Remus after a gardener in Forsyth, Georgia; but he also explained that Remus was an amalgamation of three or four black slave storytellers he knew, including Turnwold's Harbert and George Terrell. Yet Remus is also more: he is a mitigating voice, created in part to comfort anxious minds of Reconstruction-era America. His is the soothing voice of wisdom, reassuring white America with his loyalty to memories of the Old South—and meanwhile working for reconciliation between blacks and whites and between the regions after the War. Uncle Remus is also far more complex than his family retainer role suggests, for he is the product of what Harris would later memorably call his "other fellow"—the deeper and bolder part of Harris's psyche that takes over from the newspaper journalist and writes folk tales and fiction, the ostensibly plain and Christian voice that suddenly shifts paradigms and tells stories that are anything but plain and Christian. Along with the young white Abercrombie boy, Remus's devoted pupil, we learn—as Brer Rabbit lures Brer Wolf into a honey-log and burns him alive, or as he tricks Brer Wolf into selling his grandmother for vittles or, indeed, tricks Grinny Granny Wolf into boiling herself alive and subsequently feeds her flesh to her own son—that Brer Rabbit's morality is not the morality of nineteenth-century white Christianity.

The Norcross evening reveals something else important about Harris's psyche, too. He was an illegitimate child, and generous citizens of Eatonton, Middle Georgia, had luckily befriended him and his mother. Shy and self-conscious all his life, and afflicted with a mild stammer, he never read his Brer Rabbit stories aloud, not even to his own children. In fact, in May 1882, just prior to the Norcross encounter, Harris had met with Mark Twain and George Washington Cable in New Orleans to discuss joining them for a lucrative national reading tour. But Harris's inveterate, self-effacing shyness had forced him to decline their attractive invitation. Yet that summer night in the comforting and anonymous darkness at Norcross, Harris was relaxed and unobtrusive. Moreover—and for the only time in his life that we know of—he was actually able to tell some of his beloved folk stories in a public setting. It's as if Harris's "other fellow" had taken control again and had spoken for him in a deeper tongue.

Harris's payoff for temporarily escaping his self-consciousness was two rich and rarefied hours of cross-racial communion and oral folklore performance and story-collecting. Furthermore, the Norcross station tales Harris heard that summer, and the stories they reminded him of, fed directly into his second book, his ambitious and carefully structured collection of seventy-one folk stories, *Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation*. Published in November 1883, a little over a year after his fruitful Norcross experience, *Nights* was another popular and critical success for Harris. While its sales would never equal those of *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, his second book nevertheless sold 25,000 copies across twenty-five print-runs in the mid-1880s. Even two decades later, *Nights* was still doing well; a 1904 edition sold over 80,000 copies. Including posthumous collections, the Uncle Remus canon would eventually grow to 185 published stories.

In a chapter of his 2001 study, *Reading Africa into American Literature: Epics, Fables, and Gothic Tales*, ethnologist Keith Cartwright looks back over Harris's 120-year legacy and his 185 tales and argues persuasively that *Nights with Uncle Remus* is his true masterpiece. "It is Harris's understanding of the importance of folk narrative performance, his willingness to go to the source of performance, and his sheer delight in the language of performance that made *Nights with Uncle Remus* what may be the nineteenth

century's most *African* American text" (Cartwright's emphasis). Cartwright sees Harris's story-telling encounter in Norcross as a direct sign of his increased interest in capturing folk narrative performance on paper, in contrast to Harris's more anthology-like gathering of miscellaneous materials for *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings.* Harris's first book had immediately appeared in several European-language translations and still primarily owes its reputation to the Brer Rabbit and the tar-baby story, probably the world's most famous trickster tale. Drawing mostly from his previously published *Constitution* dialect material, *His Songs and His Sayings* was an assemblage of thirty Brer Rabbit tales and four other folk stories narrated by Uncle Remus; seventy "Plantation Proverbs" also written in black dialect; nine black gospel, play, and work songs; "A Story of the War" (a revised *Constitution* short story about how Remus saves his master from a Yankee sharpshooter); and twenty-one minstrelized Atlanta street scenes and sight-gags featuring Harris's earlier, more cantankerous version of Uncle Remus—the reluctant city-dweller who longed to relocate to Putnam County, Middle Georgia, where life was simpler than it was in the "dust, an' mud, an' money" of fast-paced and increasingly impersonal postwar Atlanta.

In his 3,000-word introduction to his first book, Harris was quite explicit about his goals, which also carry over to the *Nights* volume: to retell black slave stories in their "phonetically genuine" dialect and to present "a new and by no means unattractive phase of negro character." Although Harris protests that "ethnological considerations formed no part of the undertaking," we can tell that he has already undertaken at least a preliminary study of folklore origins and transmissivity. In addition to Sidney Lanier's work on metrical patterns in black songs, Harris cites three comparative studies on North American and South American folklore. Harris also notes that common sense and intuition tell us a great deal about the story-telling rhetoric of these animal tales. Harris observes that it takes "no scientific investigation" to show why the black slave "selects as his hero the weakest and most harmless of all animals, and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox." Harris saw that the stronger animals in the African American tales represented the white masters and their slavery power structure and that Brer Rabbit was the slave's folk-hero. Florence Baer's motif analysis demonstrates that 122 of the 185 Uncle Remus tales show African origins. We also know, however, from studies by John Roberts, Isidore Okepewho, and other scholars that native, continental African folk stories also portray struggles among the animals that allegorically depict resistance to oppressive authority figures and the competition for status, food, water, and possessions. So Harris actually found himself recreating a complex double-heritage of black trickster tales, both African and African American, that display human guile, ingenuity, and creativity in the face of more powerful or oppressive forces. Thus, the storytellers who were the living models for Harris's Uncle Remus both recycled and adapted old-world African stories to help reflect the experiences, and affirm the force of the human spirit, of black American slaves in the new world.

By 1883, Harris could barely keep the lid on the folk material that he had acquired after his first book appeared. In his much more ambitious 9,000-word introduction to *Nights*, three times the length of his 1880 essay, Harris explains that following his first book's publication, a substantial volume of valuable personal correspondence literally began "to pour in" from as far away as Rio de Janeiro. Additionally, reviewers from London and Berlin to New Delhi were praising Harris's work. Contributors generously sent him trickster tales they had heard, as well as leads to other story sources and informants. Between his first book and his second, Harris had also been corresponding with Mark Twain about differing versions of the golden-arm ghost tale. Meanwhile, Harris had expanded his own readings in comparative folklore, examining studies of Creek American Indian legends, Amazon tales, South African legends, Kaffir stories from the near east, Gullah tales from the Sea Islands of Georgia, and French Creole patois stories from Louisiana. Harris even printed in his introduction a standard-French translation of a 61-line French Creole story, noting that this particular tale was similar to one of Miss Meadows's stories in his first volume. In reflecting upon his extensive tale-collecting efforts and research, Harris comments that his second Uncle Remus volume "is about as complete as it could be made under the circumstances."

Harris had instinctively framed his folk tales and provided realistic oral-performance details in writing the animal stories gathered earlier in *His Songs and His Sayings.* Typically, we find Uncle Remus sitting in his cabin and performing a minor domestic task (loading his pipe, or carving shoe-pegs, or darning a hole in his coat) when his seven-year-old white listener arrives and asks a question or makes a comment that serves as Remus's segue to a story. But it is important to note that Harris had set the stories in his first volume during Reconstruction, portraying Remus, on the surface, at least, as a loyal old family retainer who supposedly "has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery" and who tells his stories "with the air of affectionate superiority" to the son of the postwar plantation owners, John and Sally Abercrombie. But Harris adjusts the time frame of *Nights*, explaining in a prefatory note to his readers that these new stories are set before the war. Anthropologically, then, Harris now has the perfect rationale for adding three more slave narrators, of varying ages and experiences, to his gallery of oral performers. Aunt Tempy, the likeable but sometimes officious middle-aged cook in the big house, narrates five stories. 'Tildy, the snappish house-girl, tells three. And, in an ambitious addition to Harris's folklore reach, Daddy Jack, Remus's eighty-year-old Gullah friend and sometime-conjurer, who had first come from Africa to the Sea Islands of Georgia, performs ten rhythmic and heavily inflected Gullah stories.

Harris also fleshes out Remus's character in this new volume; we learn more about his pride and his prejudices, and we feel some jealous tensions at times operating between Remus, foreman of the field hands, and Aunt Tempy, manager of the big house and its kitchen. Harris also gives a more interactive role to Remus's young white listener—he asks questions more frequently and regularly puts Remus on the defensive. In story XLIV, in fact, Remus pouts that the little boy is outgrowing his britches, outgrowing Remus, and apparently outgrowing the tales, too. So maybe Remus should go ahead and get his "remoovance papers" from Miss Sally, hang his bundle on his walking-cane, and "see w'at kinder dirt dey is at de fur een' er de big road." But protestations or apologies from the boy invariably bring Remus back to tell another story. He also makes sure, however, to keep reminding his adoring listener to act respectfully around his seniors—and, as he had advised in the first book, not to play with the white-trash Favers children, who are nearly as disreputable as Faulkner's den of rodent-like Snopses. After all, Remus explains in story IV, "Ole Cajy Favers, he went ter de po'house, en ez ter dat Jim Favers, I boun' you he know de inside er all de jails in dish yer State er Jawjy."

The great majority of the seventy-one tales in *Nights* are Brer Rabbit trickster stories or trickster tales featuring other resourceful creatures, along with a handful of etiological legends about the origins of human and animal traits and a few ghost stories. To help unify this lengthy cycle of tales and describe their actual performance setting, Harris regularly adds atmospheric imagery and mood coloration. For example, this scene frames Remus's first story:

It had been raining all day so that Uncle Remus found it impossible to go out. The storm had begun, the old man declared, just as the chickens were crowing for day, and it had continued almost without intermission. The dark gray clouds had blotted out the sun, and the leafless limbs of the tall oaks surrendered themselves drearily to the fantastic gusts that drove the drizzle fitfully before them.

In due course, Remus relieves the gloom by telling the little boy how Brer Rabbit helped Miss Goose escape the trap Brer Fox had set for her. Or examine the frame for story XI. Harris first points out that the rainy pre-winter season had indeed settled in, and the little boy felt surrounded by its dreariness. But Remus had put a tin pan under a persistent leak in his roof, which added "a not unmusical accompaniment to the storm." Harris next describes how Remus's shadow alternately swoops up to fill the cabin and then fades out among

the cobwebs when the old man bends over to add lightwood to his flickering hearth. Then Harris borrows a technique from Edgar Allan Poe and uses synaesthesia to merge visual and auditory imagery:

The rain, and wind, and darkness held sway without, while within, the unsteady lightwood blaze seemed to rhyme with the *drip-drip-drip* in the pan.

Harris also adds an overarching temporal frame and a plot line to provide transitions and link the stories together. Remus and his three fellow slaves tell their stories from the late fall until Christmas eve, and the storytellers in his cabin often narrate subsets of two to five interlocking tales. Also, from chapter XXV on, Daddy Jack and 'Tildy carry on a lively courtship culminating in their wedding, which takes place during the concluding Christmas chapter, number LXXI. The closing chapter also recreates some Old South plantation Christmas festivities, merging into an epiphanic celebration of renewal and rebirth, in aesthetic contrast to the gloominess that Harris evokes to begin his folklore cycle.

The collective result of Harris's enhancements to this second collection of tales is a much more vital, interactive, and engaging performance environment, for Remus's circle and for today's readers, than we experienced in his first book. In addition to the folklore research he cites in his extensive introduction to *Nights*, Harris occasionally inserts footnotes in his text to explain a source, interpret a dialectal or metaphoric expression, or describe the body language or voicing performance of a certain segment of a story. Carried out well before the advent of portable recording equipment, Harris's achievement in this volume is all the more remarkable for its thoroughness and systematic attention to anthropological and linguistic detail. Harris even supplies a short explanatory essay on the Gullah dialect, a 39-word glossary of Gullah expressions, and a note explaining that Gullah speakers frequently add postvocalic vowels to words—and how these sounds are elided, so that "heard-a," becomes "yeard-a," becomes "yeddy."

Furthermore, Harris distinguishes phonetically among Remus's, Tempy's, 'Tildy's, and, especially, Daddy Jack's speech performance patterns, rhythms, sound effects, and enunciations—and visually, among their respective physical poses, gestures, grimaces, and other interpretive and dramatic movements. Frequently, too, Harris describes how the individual audience members interrupt a narration with their spontaneous approval of story events or delivery style—"Enty!" (ain't he?) affirms Jack; "Dar you is!" interjects 'Tildy; or Aunt Tempy suddenly exclaims, "What I done tell you!" The slave storytellers and the little boy also regularly question story details, because an event seems incredulous or contradicts an earlier plot development, or because a listener had heard a different version of that tale in the past. Additionally, Harris shows his field-collection expertise by pointing out the strong proprietary ownership the storytellers exercise over their material. For example, in narrative XXXV Remus won't get involved when the little boy asks him to clarify a detail in one of Daddy Jack's stories; Remus simply says, " 'Taint none er my tale." Remus, furthermore, knows from repeated experiences that Jack will always claim his Gullah version of a story to be the more authentic one.

But Remus also regularly deflects inquiries about his own stories. In tale XXXVI, for instance, Mammy-Bammy Big-Money had drowned Brer Wolf; yet the wolf is alive and well in the next story. When the little boy challenges this miraculous resurrection, Remus responds defensively, "Now, den, is I'm de tale, er is de tale me? . . . Dat w'at de tale say." And then he resumes his narrative: "Dead er no dead, Brer Wolf was living in the swamp, found a lady-friend, and. . . . " Similarly, when the boy queries Remus about his use of "jiblets" to refer to a cow's liver, lungs, and heart in story XXXXVII, the old narrator responds "Tooby sho, honey." He then briefly explains that some people call them jiblets and some people call them hasletts. "You

do de namin',” he concludes, “en I'll do de eatin'.”

Although Remus and Aunt Tempy are occasionally jealous of the other's status on the Abercrombie plantation, they essentially understand and sympathize with each other and enjoy telling folk stories from the old days; they also acknowledge that the “ole times” are about all they have left. They both value the oral traditions passed down through their families and relish the storytelling sessions in Remus's cabin. In terms of human comedy and sheer slapstick, however, Harris especially likes playing off the wizened old conjurer Daddy Jack against saucy 'Tildy, who initially laughs at his awkward attempts at courtship and their five- or six-decade age difference. In a satiric allusion to Jack's Sea Islands background, 'Tildy protests that she's not going to be chased by a “web-foot.” In story XXIX, 'Tildy tells a highly animated, progressively more intense narrative of Harris's version of the golden-arm ghost story (in his variant, a man steals silver coins off a dead woman's eyes). She then springs on Daddy Jack and frightens him at the climax of the story, to get even with him for earlier calling her “pidjin-toed.” Critics have also observed that the comic byplay among these four narrators and their differences in language and gesture may operate as a burlesque of white social-class structures.

Probably the most entertaining, although not the most anthropologically or dialectally complex, tale in *Nights with Uncle Remus* is story XIX, the often-anthologized “The Moon in the Mill-Pond.” Uncle Remus explains that occasionally all the creatures would “segashuate tergedder,” as if they were all part of “de same fambly connexion.” Harris may be referring indirectly to his career-long belief—much elaborated in his *Atlanta Constitution* essays, articles in *The Saturday Evening Post*, and local-color short stories—in the need for cross-racial harmony and mutual understanding following the ravages of the Civil War and sectional and racial strife. Yet, as James Baldwin once observed, the true artist is “an incorrigible disturber of the peace.” Cocky, boundary-crossing Brer Rabbit simply cannot stand to see the neighborhood too quiet and the stronger creatures (allegorically, the white power-structure) too comfortable.

So, trickster to the core, Brer Rabbit invites everyone to a fishing party at the mill-pond, making sure that “Miss Meadows en Miss Motts, en de yuther gals” would be there, too. (Although Harris always deflected this question, Miss Meadows and the gals, also present in the first volume, run a fancy house and apparently belong to the world's oldest profession.) As I have pointed out in other writings, Remus swings into wonderfully engaging narrative performance rhythms at this point in his story. “Brer B'ar 'low he gwine ter fish fer mud-cats,” and Brer Wolf “gwine ter fish fer horney heads,” and Brer Fox “gwine ter fish fer peerch fer de ladies,” and Brer Tarrypin “gwine ter fish fer minners.” Brer Rabbit, with a wink at Brer Tarrypin, “low he gwine ter fish fer suckers.”

Then Brer Rabbit announces that nobody can fish in the pond that night after all, because “de Moon done drap in de water.” All the creatures see the moon's reflection swaying in the bottom of the pond. “Well, well, well,” “Mighty bad, mighty bad,” and “Tum, tum, tum,” observe the critters, in chorus, while Miss Meadows “she squall out, 'Ain't dat too much?' ” The animals agree that they should borrow Mr. Mud-Turtle's fishing net and seine out the moon. Brer Rabbit's straightman and accomplice, Brer Tarrypin, also just happens to remind the crowd of the folk belief that a pot of gold awaits anyone who can successfully fetch the moon out of the water. The physically stronger creatures in Uncle Remus's African American folklore canon are invariably “intellectually challenged,” an enduring part of the sociology of slave tales. Sooner or later, the slave will make ol' massa look gullible and stupid, because he is. So each of the larger creatures wades out into the pond, steps off over his head, and dunks himself. Miss Meadows and the gals ridicule the dripping animals, and Brer Rabbit sends them home for dry clothes. Then Brer Rabbit observes wryly: “I hear talk dat de moon'll bite at a hook ef you take fools fer baits, en I lay dat's de onliest way fer ter ketch 'er.” Remus ends his story with a final rhetorical variation of his narrative rhythm: “Brer Fox en Brer Wolf en Brer B'ar went drippin' off, en Brer Rabbit en Brer Tarrypin, dey went home wid de gals.”

In tale LVI, Aunt Tempy tells a story about how Brer Rabbit convinced Mr. Lion that a hurricane was coming and tied the lion to a tree, supposedly for his own safety. When the other creatures came by, they marveled at how Brer Rabbit could have pulled off that particular power play. Yet nobody laughs at Aunt Tempy's story; moreover, when the little boy asks why Brer Rabbit would want to tie up the lion in the first place, Aunt Tempy does not have a ready answer. So Uncle Remus comes to her rescue and explains that a long time ago Mr. Lion had driven Brer Rabbit away from the branch where he went to get some water—and that Brer Rabbit had been waiting from that time on to get even. Angry, Aunt Tempy says that she's never going to tell another story, because nobody has fun listening to her narratives. Then she observes pettishly that if Remus had told this tale, "dey'd a bin mo' gigglin' gwine on dan you kin shake a stick at." Uncle Remus replies to her comment "with unusual emphasis":

"Well, I tell you dis, Sis Tempy . . . if deze yer tales wuz des fun, fun, fun, en giggle, giggle, giggle, I let you know I'd a-done drapt um long ago. Yasser, w'en it come down ter gigglin' you kin des count ole Remus out."

Joel Chandler Harris certainly knew that these racial folk tales were not just entertaining giggle-stories for children. The predatory and violent world allegorized in these animal stories often portrays those literally and figuratively dark "nights with Uncle Remus," where the slaves' only chance for survival was to use their brains faster than the white race could use its brawn or cruelty, where evasion was not a sign of cowardice but a path to safety, where a seemingly cheerful and uncomplaining "Doin' jest fine, suh" when you met massa on the big road was a coded earlier version of Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask"—the mask that "grins and lies." In his introductory essay to the Penguin Classics edition of *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, Robert Hemenway reminds us that "Brer Rabbit expresses archetypes of human emotion because one identifies with his liberating sense of anarchy—an imperative of liberation embedded deep in [African American] history." Without believing in the possibility of revolution, continues Hemenway, slaves "could scarcely have endured their physical pain." Trickster folk tales are popular in every culture—because they promise that oppressed peoples can cross boundaries, shift shapes, psyche out their opponents, and even get inside the system in the cause of freedom.

Cheating, revenge-taking, whippings and beatings, starvation, selling family members for food or money, death by fire, cannibalism, and the death of grandmothers and offspring are plot elements in twenty-six of the seventy-one stories in *Nights with Uncle Remus*. A similar ratio of violence applies to the tales in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*. When Brer Rabbit uses his celebrated reverse-psychology ploy in the tar-baby story to insist with Brer Fox that burning, drowning, hanging, being skinned alive, and having his eyes, ears, or legs torn from his body are fates preferable to being thrown into the dreaded briar patch, Harris graphically enumerates documented forms of slave punishment and death. Yet, when the little white boy protests in story LIV of *Nights* because Granny Wolf was parboiled and her flesh fed to her own son, Remus replies obliquely, "Dat was endurin' der dog days. Dey er mighty wom times, mon, dem ar dog days is." Generations of black storytellers, whom Harris helps to recreate and honor in Daddy Jack, Uncle Remus, 'Tildy, and Aunt Tempy, constantly wove into their tales coded references to the dog days of full-blown chattel slavery in America. Furthermore, before blacks met slavery in the Americas, many of their ancestors had also known, or known about, slavery in their native lands, as Olaudah Equiano and other former African slaves have documented.

Yet even in the face of the violent motifs and themes in the Uncle Remus tales, we also see how Harris's stories have worked their iconographies into popular culture. The Disneyfication of Harris has helped to

make Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and Brer Bear household images. “Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah,” the hit song from *The Song of the South*, won an Academy Award for best song in 1946, but James Baskett could only receive his Oscar for portraying Uncle Remus in a private ceremony. Disney re-released the movie four times and also reincarnated dense-brained Brer Bear as Cousin Albert, the lead singer in the “The Country Bear Jamboree” animatronics band at Orlando’s Walt Disney World. Cousin Albert loves singing “I’ve got blooood on the saddle / I’ve got blooood on the ground.” “I’m gonna knock your head clean off,” Brer Bear keeps saying to Brer Rabbit, in a litany of threatened violence that children, and adults, will catch themselves repeating after seeing the animation sequences from *Song of the South* that still run on the Disney Channel’s “Vault Disney.” On your way to the water-ride at Orlando Disney’s Splash Mountain, you first walk past Uncle Remus’s empty cabin living room, wired with speakers from which you hear—but don’t see—a non-dialectal Remus-voice narrating a Brer Rabbit tale. Then you ride your fiberglass raft through Brer Rabbit’s Laughing Place and The Briar Patch of disconcertingly phallic 18-inch vinyl thorns on the way to the waterfall, where Brer Fox or Brer Rabbit grins at you from the bow as you plummet five stories down a 45-degree slope at forty miles an hour.

A hardware manufacturing company used to sell Tar Baby Nails, guaranteed to clinch tight, while Atlanta silversmiths regularly ran ads for genuine Uncle Remus spoons, their handles decorated with his smiling visage. At your local supermarket today you can buy a 12-ounce bottle of Brer Rabbit Molasses, distributed by Del Monte in San Francisco. Bugs Bunny and Yosemite Sam, the Road Runner and the Coyote, Tweetie and Sylvester, and the rest of the Saturday morning cartoon herd reinvent Brer Rabbit’s tricksterisms. Both Melville’s White Whale and Harris’s Tar Baby have become literary and popular culture icons, and they each derive from a world of violent assaults and revenge-taking to appease personal insults. Jeff MacNelly captures the image of Saddam Hussein as America’s exasperating “Iraqi Tar-Baby” in his 1991 Gulf War political cartoon showing a long-eared Uncle Sam stuck hand-and-foot to Saddam’s oil-rich but dangerously adhesive self.

Protesting that you don’t want to be thrown in the briar patch, when you really do want to go there, has found its metaphoric way into the language of western culture in dozens of incarnations, from British House of Commons debates to corporate deregulation policy decisions. And a computer worm-virus is still another manifestation of the double-bind trap that almost killed Brer Rabbit—“the more you fight it, the worse it gets.” In 2001 D. Patrick Miller of fearlessbooks.com posted on the web “Senator Helms Meets Uncle Remus,” a wry take on what some people never learn from their cultural tar babies. Yes, Uncle Remus can make us both giggle and grieve.

The sheer energy of Harris’s stories makes them work well for us, too—both the vigorousness of his animal characters’ gestures, body language, and outrageous struggles, pratfalls, and contortions, and the wonderfully anthropomorphized, fast-talking, street-wise language of the dialogue between and among the critters, who talk “de same ez folks.” One of Harris’s several legacies, in fact, was his almost single-handed revolutionizing of children’s literature. As John Goldthwaite points out, the highly believable give-and-take dialogues of Harris’s animal figures, along with their easily visualized gestures and motions, brought animal stories beyond Aesop and the Brothers Grimm into modern settings and parlance. Winnie the Pooh and Tigger, Kipling’s jungle creatures, Uncle Wiggly, Charlotte and her barnyard friends, Peter Rabbit, Little Black Sambo (who is actually a resourceful trickster, not a “Sambo figure”), Peter Pan, and Pogo all crossed over into “an advanced state of anthropomorphism,” thanks to Harris’s reinvention of the street-smart, or loveable but sometimes not-so-smart, animal hero.

Harris left us five legacies. He was an innovative and influential children’s author. Harris was also a major New South journalist, urging national reconciliation and racial understanding after the Civil War. He was a popular literary comedian, too, even though he could never take to the stage as Twain did. Additionally, Harris was a sensitive portrayer of the plight of the poor white and of the black man and woman during

Reconstruction; “Free Joe and the Rest of the World,” “Mingo,” “At Teague Poteet’s,” and, among other works, the wonderfully vital *Chronicles of Aunt Minervy Ann* are superb local-color writings. Finally, Harris recreated and helped preserve an entire, and still influential, African American trickster folk-tale tradition. Reviewing his conscientious reconstruction and transmission of black oral-presentation styles and narrative craft, Keith Cartwright asserts that “Harris might arguably be called the greatest single authorial force behind the literary development of African American folk matter and manner.” Like nothing else in his canon, *Nights with Uncle Remus* shows Harris’s cultural sensitivity and his masterful rendering of folk-tale performance skills—including physical gestures, audience- storyteller dynamics, and aural discrimination. Only a modern folklorist armed with a camcorder could have done a better job.

Furthermore, Harris not only taught Mark Twain and other white local colonists, including Flannery O’Connor and William Faulkner, several important lessons about black dialect, black portraiture, and the poor white. He also influenced and helped make viable the later contributions to African American oral and written folklore legacies of Charles Chesnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison—who uses tar-baby characters in at least three of her novels. Fellow Eatonton-born writer Alice Walker vilifies Harris, however, for having stolen and then appropriated for the white man’s publishing industry her native black folklore legacy. The Harlem Renaissance and many black scholars and writers in the 1960s had also written off Harris as a racially clichéd, if not downright racist, purveyor of Uncle Tom images and themes.

But it is fair to say that Harris and his complex legacies are back now, under full and more appreciative study. As Robert Hemenway argues, we don’t want to overreact to Harris’s use of some white nineteenth-century Southern stereotypes by “throwing out the tar baby with the bandana.” Robert Bone, in what remains the best one-liner in Harris scholarship, observes of Brer Rabbit: “Having been raised in a brier patch, he is one tough bunny.” Raised in his own Middle Georgia briar patch, Harris was tough, too. His journalism, short stories, novels, and folk tales paint a complex picture of race, slavery, class, cultural difference, and the shifting of power in the Old South becoming New. Joel Chandler Harris also teaches us eternal truths about the agility and resourcefulness of the human mind and the resiliency of the human spirit, beyond racial lines and beyond cultural expectations and assumptions.

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Suggestions for Further Reading

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