

Sherlock's 'Anansi the Spider Man'

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Review by
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I'VE ALWAYS had a stop in the mind listening to the Anansi story. The little thread-legged house spider I know couldn't possibly carry four plantains, couldn't tie Snake to bamboo and carry him off to Tiger.

Now, on the dust-cover of Philip Sherlock's book "Anansi the Spider Man", comes Marcia Brown's drawing of Anansi — perfect spider, perfect gentleman. With great dexterity she manages to make the outline of the spider also the outline of a city slicker in top hat and tails, bowing graciously with a glad eye. I could now press on to the stories prepared for Anansi to move mountains if only he packed his coat.

The point about Anansi, though is that he never backs his coat and no one knows that better than Mr. Sherlock, who in these stories makes no attempt to moralise him. So we find Anansi dressed up as an M.D. going to Fish country, healing the fish by frying them, covering the bones with the bed linen, and leaving the relatives instructions not to disturb the patient.

This is the real Anansi; and we find him real again in Crab country where he went to try and catch the crabs by preachin'. The crabs were too clever though to come to preachin', so next Sunday Anansi brought his friends along, with trumpets and timbrels.

"The crabs saw Rat banging away at his big drum, "boom, boom, boom!" John Crow fiddled away as fast as he could so his fiddle went "squea, squea, squeak!" Bullfrog blew out his chest twice as big as usual, and his trumpet sounded "baw, baw, baw!"

Still the crabs wouldn't come. Finally, Anansi persuaded them to dress up in white satin and come to a baptism.

"**B**ACK came the crabs in their long, white gowns. Down to the river they went, four by four. Anansi, Rat, Crow and Bullfrog took the crabs and dipped them in the river — once, twice, and three times; and then they clapped them in a big sack they had handy to take them home for dinner, for they were all very fond of crab. When the bag was full Anansi called out: "That's all the baptising for today" and he and his friends started off home. "What wonderful preaching!", said Anansi. "We'll go back next Sunday and preach some more".

I have quoted these two passages at length because I want to compare them with the original dialect story. Translations, like wives, are said to be never strictly faithful if they

have an ounce of charm. Mr. Sherlock's translation from the original is faithful enough. Compare for example the last quote but one with this:

"Anansi tell Ratta fe roll de drum, an Blackbud fe rub de fiddle string till it ketch fire, an' Toad fe blow de flute as hard as him can; an' 'Nansi self would be readin' de tune".

But how do they compare for charm? I got the impression that Mr. Sherlock's version has the hearty tone (but not the deadly heartiness) of the English story book. It doesn't have the rhythm and imagery of the native West Indian story. On the other hand in a sentence like, "What wonderful preaching; "We'll go back next Sunday and preach some more", Mr. Sherlock introduces a subtlety of humour quite foreign to the original but fitting in very well with it. The original runs: "Tenk God me got some a de clever man dem fe me brekfus".

Anansi stories are those of a slave people who lived under the whip, some of them under the brand — of their civilised masters, but who, nonetheless had to be charming to their masters and keep their savagery for their Anansi stories.

WE ARE told that on the recital of any special piece of knavery on Anansi's part, ordinary means of expression failed the slaves and they flung themselves on the ground and wriggled in convulsions of merriment. So there is in the Anansi stories an essential core of earnest savagery which is undesirable to bring into stories for children. Compare Mr. Sherlock's version of the crabs' baptism ("Back came the crabs) with this:

"Anansi mek a bargain wid him t'ree fren' fe baptize Br'er Crab wid boilin' water. An' him get a deep barril an' order crab fe slide into de barril an' as crab settle demself in a de barril Anansi pitch de pot a boilin' water pon dem an' de whole a Crab body 'tun red. An' Anansi glad an' say, "Tenk God me got some a de clever man dem fe me brekfus".

This is not the play-play of Mr. Sherlock's version. Anansi is the slave and the crabs are his masters. In this important sense Anansi stories can never be made into children's stories.

Mr. Sherlock has, for the most part, selected stories where Anansi's knavery is amusing and comparatively harmless. Where he hasn't, in

stories like "Yung — Kyung — Pyung", (a version of "Rumpelstiltskin", beautifully illustrated by Marcia Brown) he lessens the cruelty of the original. In the original Anansi manages to find out the names of the daughters of the King and Queen, and to the accompaniment of a fiddle-and-drum band sings them out loud six times before the whole palace:

"**A**FTER six time sing de Queen yerry.

She say: "Who dat a call me daughter name?"

Anansi tell dem fe play all de better. Den de Queen massoo himself from upstairs, an' t'row down bruk him neck".

The King, too, when he heard the names fell down stiff dead. Then Anansi married the youngest daughter and reigned. And we are told:

"Anansi is de wickedest King ever reign. Sometime him here, sometime him gone run 'pon him rope an' tief cow fe him wife".

Mr. Sherlock's version leaves the King and Queen in good health, marries off the youngest daughter to a member of the band and shows Anansi content with a bag of gold. Lesser men would no doubt have had to endure the daughter to enjoy the wealth.

If it cost less than 17/6 this book would serve junior schools much better than a great deal of the stuff now being used. So much better, in fact, it would well be worth it.

"Anansi the Spider Man" will no doubt run into a second edition and there are faults children will notice that can easily be corrected. On page 61 the text has Rat with his drum, the illustration Rat with his fiddle. On page 95 Jamaican children will point out that Parson Crow isn't black. The illustration on Page 5 shows a wonderfully peevish Tiger glaring down at poor Anansi while the text describes a supercilious Tiger not sparing Anansi a glance.

To make up for the slip Miss Brown really lets merriment loose on page 7. Her cue is a great wave of laughter bursting from all the animals in the forest. They were laughing because Anansi wanted the names of the stories told in the evening changed from Tiger stories to Anansi stories and to support his claim he offered to catch Snake alive.

"The frogs and parrots laughed. Tiger laughed loudest of all, for how could feeble Anansi catch Snake alive".

But Anansi did catch Snake alive and from that day to this the stories are called Anansi stories. Jack Mandora, Sherlock choose none.