INTERNATIONAL OUTREACH
CULTUREGUIDE

Russia
Series 1
Elementary (K–6)
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FOLKLORE & LANGUAGE

FABLES AND FAIRY TALES

Russia’s history, values, and ideals are expressed through its folklore. Stories are handed down from one generation to the next. They serve to entertain and teach moral lessons. Through stories, children learn to respect Russian values.

Starting Points

1. Watch a short video clip of a cartoon fairy tale (i.e., Disney’s Cinderella). Movies such as these are based on stories that have been told for hundreds of years. Many cultures have a long history of storytelling, and Russia is no exception.

2. Ask the students why they like listening to fairy tales. Do they learn anything from these stories? Why do we tell them?

3. Read the Russian fairy tale, The Firebird. Try to think of a fairy tale that is similar.

Information

Fables
Russian fables are similar to those we know in the United States. They include a moral that teaches a lesson. One particular fable, The Crow and the Crawfish, emphasizes the importance of not being prideful or boastful of one’s own strength, intelligence, or talents.

The Crow and the Crawfish
One day a crow was flying over a beautiful blue lake. Down in the clear water he saw a crawfish. The hungry crow swooped down and snatched up the crawfish and carried him into the forest, where he landed on the branch of a tree. The crow wanted to sit there and enjoy his lunch. The crawfish knew that he was in serious trouble. He didn’t want to be eaten but could see no way to escape.

Suddenly the crawfish yelled, “Crow, Crow! Your father and mother flew over my lake often, and I saw that they were good.”

Without opening his mouth the crow grunted, “Uh-huh.”

Again the crawfish cried, “I knew your brothers and sisters; I watched them catch fish in the lake. They were also good.”

Again, the crow answered without opening his mouth.

The crawfish went on saying, “Everyone in your family is good; however, they cannot compare to you. You are the cleverest of all. In fact, you are the most clever in all the world!”
The crow liked these words so much that he couldn’t resist and began to caw at the top of his lungs to the whole world that he was the cleverest of all creatures. In doing so, he released the crawfish who fell safely to the bottom of the lake. The crawfish wisely instructed his children to avoid the dangers of boasting.

**Russian Fairy Tales and Folklore**

Fairy tales often contain some element of truth. Along with the adventures that any fairy tale holds, they tell much about the culture and way of life to which people aspire. In Russian history, the majority of the people were peasants. The rulers possessed the bulk of the country’s riches. Therefore, many fairy tales are based on the life that peasants dreamed about, but did not enjoy. Stories often tell of a clever or beautiful peasant outwitting an evil ogre, or performing great deeds for the tsar, the Russian king or emperor. Afterward, the peasant would be granted great riches, half the kingdom, or marriage into the royal family. Because Russians believed that God granted the position of tsar to a chosen individual, he was traditionally revered by the people; fairy tales often exemplify the tsar’s wise and just actions.

**Baba Yaga**

*Baba Yaga* (ba-buh yeah-GAW) is an important character in Russian fairy tales. Baba Yaga is a witch who lives in a hut in the middle of a forest. She is a witch who is forced to help people. In many stories, people seek her advice and aid which she grants them because of their forcefulness. In other stories, she possesses different objects of power and, when people request her help, they must complete tasks in an allotted amount of time before she will aid them. In some tales, she is simply a wise woman with few powers. In others, she is a powerful witch and can control the night and day. Baba Yaga traditionally flies around in a mortar and pestle—a ceramic or wooden cup and post for crushing things into a powder. If she is involved in the story, Baba Yaga is usually not a main character, but she introduces an important development in the plot (see Folklore & Language Visual 1).

**The Firebird**

There was once a tsar of Russia who had three sons and was the richest tsar of all the kingdoms. He owned the most beautiful garden, where he walked every day. In the garden, there was a large tree with golden apples, the tsar’s favorite tree of all.

One morning as he was strolling through his garden admiring his gorgeous tree, the tsar noticed that two of his golden apples were missing. “I know there were two more apples here yesterday,” he said to himself. “I counted them all.” That evening he hid by the tree to catch the thief. He waited late into the night and finally saw a light flash across the garden. Surprised and stunned, he watched a large flaming bird alight on the branch of his apple tree (see Folklore & Language Visual 2). The bird’s feathers were a brilliant gold, so bright that the light hurt the tsar’s eyes. He was too awed to move but whispered to himself, “The firebird.”

The next morning the tsar told his sons that whoever could capture the firebird alive would receive half of the tsar’s kingdom at once and the other half when he died. The sons swore to do their best, not for the reward, but because they loved their father.
That night, the eldest son, Sergei, waited in the garden. The soft night air soon put him to sleep, and the firebird came and stole two apples without even being seen. In the morning, Sergei lied and told his father that the Firebird never appeared.

The next night, Dimitri, the second son, kept watch in the garden. He too fell asleep. The next morning, he also lied to his father, claiming that the firebird never came.

The third night, Ivan, the third son, stood watch. He made himself uncomfortable, and if he started to become drowsy, he splashed water in his eyes. Suddenly he saw a bright streak of gold. It was the firebird! As it perched on a branch to snatch the apples, Prince Ivan quietly moved closer. He made a grab for the firebird, but it was too fast and he only succeeded in grabbing one of the long, brilliant, tail feathers (see Folklore & Language Visual 3).

The next morning, he told the tsar his tale and presented the feather to his father. The tsar was satisfied for a while because the firebird didn’t come back to the garden. Soon, however, he became consumed with the feather and looked at it everyday. He wanted the firebird so badly that he again told his sons that whoever could bring him the firebird, alive, would be given half the kingdom then, and the other half at the death of the tsar. The two oldest sons set out together immediately, but Prince Ivan waited for his father’s blessing and set out on his own.

Ivan rode for a long time until he came to a sign that said, “He who continues this way shall lose his horse.” There was no other way to go, so Ivan continued in that direction even though he loved his horse. After a few days, his horse dropped dead beneath him. A gray wolf was standing by the roadside (see Folklore & Language Visual 4), and as Ivan cried, the wolf asked, “Ivan, if you so loved this horse, why did you continue in this direction?” Ivan told him the story and then continued on his way. Three days later, the gray wolf showed up again and offered to help Ivan.

The wolf took Prince Ivan to Tsar Darmot’s garden where the firebird was kept in a golden cage. He said to Ivan, “Prince, you must jump this wall and take the firebird out of the golden cage. Do not touch any part of the golden cage besides the spring. Promise me that you won’t touch it.” Ivan promised and hopped over the wall.

Ivan immediately saw the firebird and took it out of the cage. He looked at the beautiful golden cage and thought how nice it would be to carry the bird in, but as soon as he touched the cage, alarms went off all over the garden and palace. Guards jumped out, grabbed Ivan, and carried him before the tsar. He told the tsar his story.

Tsar Darmot asked why the son of such a powerful tsar had to resort to stealing, instead of just asking for it. To redeem himself, Ivan had to do the tsar a favor. The tsar wanted the white horse with a golden mane and tail and told Ivan that he would give him the firebird if he would bring back the horse.

Ivan sadly walked out and told the gray wolf his story. The gray wolf consented to take him to the golden-maned horse if Ivan would follow his orders this time. After a day of running like the wind, they arrived at Tsar Avron’s stables. The wolf pleaded with Ivan to follow his instructions carefully. “Go into the stables,” he said, “take the golden-maned horse, but do not touch the golden bridle that is hanging on the wall.”
Ivan snuck into the stables where all the grooms were sleeping and took the horse (see Folklore & Language Visual 5). As he was turning to leave, he noticed the golden bridle. It was so beautiful that he couldn’t resist touching it. As soon as he took hold of the bridle an alarm rang out, and all the grooms awoke and seized Prince Ivan.

Tsar Avron decided to allow Ivan to redeem himself by bringing Helen the Beautiful to him. She was the most beautiful tsarina (Russian princess), in the world, and if Ivan would bring her to Tsar Avron, he would be given the golden-maned horse. In sadness Prince Ivan returned to the gray wolf and confessed his mistake. The wolf sighed and consented to take him to Helen the Beautiful. After running for two days and nights, the wolf stopped under a tree and told Ivan to wait there.

The gray wolf snuck to the palace and waited by the garden gate. Soon Helen the Beautiful came out to walk in her garden (see Folklore & Language Visual 6). Before the maids had a chance to sound an alarm, the wolf had jumped over the gate, grabbed Helen the Beautiful, leaped back out of the garden, and ran out of sight.

Prince Ivan thought Helen was so beautiful that he had fallen in love with her before they reached Tsar Avron’s palace. “Friend wolf,” he cried, “I do not want to give up Helen the Beautiful for a horse with a golden mane and tail. What shall I do?”

The gray wolf simply answered, “Trust me.” He gave Ivan instructions and then changed himself into a form of a young woman exactly like Helen the Beautiful. They walked into the tsar’s palace, and Tsar Avron was so happy that he gave Ivan the golden-maned horse and the golden bridle. Ivan took the horse back to the tree where he had left Helen, and they proceeded on to Tsar Darmot’s kingdom.

After a time, Ivan missed his gray wolf and called to him. The wolf appeared by the golden-maned horse, and Ivan joyfully leaped onto the wolf’s back. When they arrived at Tsar Darmot’s, Ivan was sad again. He told the wolf how beautifully the horse suited Helen the Beautiful and how it would be a shame to give it up. The wolf again consented to help Ivan.

The wolf changed himself into a golden-maned horse, and he and Prince Ivan went to Tsar Darmot’s palace (see Folklore & Language Visual 7). The Tsar was delighted and gave Ivan the Firebird and the golden cage. Ivan took them back to Helen and the group again set out on their way.

Ivan started to miss his friend, the gray wolf, and he called for him. For several days, they all traveled together until they arrived at the place where Prince Ivan’s horse had fallen dead. Here the gray wolf said he must leave them, for he could be of no more use. Then he vanished.

At this time, Ivan’s brothers caught up to him. They were very jealous of their younger brother, so they tied him to a tree and stole everything he had gained. The evil brothers left him for dead and took Helen, the bird, and the horse as their own.

For many days, Ivan was tied to the tree. He was almost dead, and the crows were flying around him, waiting for him to finally die so they could have dinner. Suddenly, the gray wolf appeared again. He made the crows fetch water for Ivan. They untied him, and when he was revived he hopped on the wolf’s back and raced to his father’s palace.
Ivan walked into the palace hall where his brother was preparing to marry Helen the Beautiful. He threw open the doors to see the shocked faces of his brothers who had been sure he was dead (see Folklore & Language Visual 8). Helen ran to him crying, “This is the one; this is the prince who won me!” The tsar embraced his son who he had thought was dead. Helen the Beautiful told the tsar the whole story and he learned that Ivan had not only brought home the tsarina, but the horse with the golden mane and tail, and the firebird as well.

The tsar furiously ordered that his other sons be banished from the kingdom forever. He then ordered the feast to continue, and in a short time Prince Ivan and Helen the Beautiful were married. They lived happily ever after with the firebird in their garden and the golden-maned horse in their stables.

Activities

1. Make puppets of the characters in “The Firebird.” Color the pictures (see Folklore & Language Visual 9) and glue them on popsicle sticks or paper bags. Perform the story using your puppets.

2. Rewrite one of the stories you read. You may want to add characters or change parts of the plot. Try writing your story in a different style, such as a poem, a news report, or a mystery novel.

3. Make a book of “The Crow and the Crawfish.” Make sure to include the lesson or moral at the end.

4. Listen to Stravinsky’s ballet The Firebird. What images come to your mind? Can you “hear” parts of the story in the music?

Discussion Questions

1. What was your favorite part of the story? Why?

2. What lesson can we learn from the fairy tale “The Firebird?” What can we learn from “The Crow and the Crawfish?”

3. Why do Russian people tell fables and fairy tales? Why do you like hearing fairy tales?

4. How are Russian fables and fairy tales different from the stories with which you are familiar? How are they similar?
Folklore & Language Visual 2: The Firebird
Folklore & Language Visual 3: Ivan and the Firebird
Folklore & Language Visual 6: Helen the Beautiful