

The Signature Story Meets the Eclectic Muse
by Mary Hamilton
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When I was a beginning storyteller, I heard other tellers speak of signature stories. “What’s that?” I wondered. When I learned it was a story a teller was known for telling, I thought, “Wow! Wouldn’t it be something to be known for telling a particular story?” I longed to have a signature story of my very own.

By 1992, it seemed I indeed had one. *Some Dog*, a tall tale I had created to celebrate that genre of Kentucky folklore pleased audiences. It is a story that weaves together three traditional Kentucky tall tales, my family, and the farm of my childhood. Listeners and storytelling colleagues even introduced me to their friends adding, “You have to hear her tell *Some Dog*. It’s wonderful.” I was thrilled. At last, I had a signature story. So I told *Some Dog* again and again. Then some listeners and colleagues began to introduce me to their friends by saying, “She tells the best tall tales” or “She has these funny stories about her brothers.” Uh oh, I had only one tall tale in my repertoire, but my listeners assumed I had more. *Some Dog* was also the only story that featured my four brothers. I didn’t want to disappoint my listeners, but they had expectations I had no desire to fulfill. I felt trapped.

Then I met a storyteller who had just heard me tell *Some Dog*, and she was worried. She had woven two of the same traditional tales together. After hearing me, she was afraid folks would think she copied me. She even wondered if I thought she should stop telling her story because I was already weaving those same two stories together. I thought, “Of course two storytellers could weave the same two tales together. I thought of it, so why couldn’t someone else think of it too. The Cinderella plot certainly never made it all around the world on the tongue of just one storyteller.”

It dawned on me that *Some Dog* as a signature story was problematic. It was not a unique tall tale because it had elements that were not my invention, so could never be mine and mine alone. It was so long it was often the only story I told in a set, so it gave listeners a mistaken impression of my repertoire. I needed a new signature story.

Maybe I could create one? Perhaps, if I chose a story to tell often, that story would become associated with me, and I would have a new signature story. This idea arose at about the time I began telling *Jump Rope Kingdom*, an anecdote from my life. It was short – good. It really happened to me, so no one else was apt to come up with a telling of the story – good. And it touched on a theme, inclusion, which mattered to me. So I told it, often.

Then, the inevitable happened. In very short olio sets, I would tell *Jump Rope Kingdom*. Audience members would later introduce me to their friends saying, “You need to hear her. She tells delightful little personal stories.” Oops, another mistaken impression of my repertoire.

What is a teller to do? If a story becomes our signature story, do we inadvertently invite our listeners to make broad assumptions about our repertoires?

When I think about signature stories, I can’t help thinking about the writing of a signature. When I opened my first checking account, my parents emphasized the importance of choosing how I would sign my checks and writing my name in that particular way on each check. “The bank expects consistency,” they said, “because they

count on your signature to know that you are indeed the person who wrote the check.” Now, I understand my written signature to have two functions: it verifies that I am indeed the one who has given permission for my money to be paid to others in financial transactions, and it serves as my pledge that I will keep my word on documents I sign.

But what of a signature story? Does it verify a teller’s intentions? Does it serve as a teller’s pledge to the audience? A pledge of what? Consistency, perhaps, but consistent what?

Consistently told? Perhaps a signature story is one a teller could tell in every program. If that’s the case, then my signature story had better be short, multi-purpose in theme, multi-genre if possible, and appropriate for all ages. Uh oh, there is no one story in my repertoire that I would tell for both preschool audiences and adult audiences.

Express the teller’s consistent view of life? Well, my view of life is pretty wide and so are my story choices. Nevertheless, I’ve always believed that every story honestly told, whatever the genre, reveals some aspect of the teller’s life view. After all, in storytelling, the teller is right there with the audience. It’s not like the bank needing my signature on a check to verify I’m the one who wrote the check – I’m present when I tell a story. I’m absent when the check I’ve written goes to the bank.

A consistent genre? I tell the stories I am drawn to tell, based in my life, based in folklore, and based in the lives of others. While some tellers seem to have a genre specific muse, my muse has never been happy with one genre.

What purpose does a signature story serve if the teller’s repertoire is eclectic? Perhaps none. Perhaps my muse has correctly perceived that becoming known for a particular story could be a trap, not a plus. No doubt for some tellers having a signature story works in their favor and works well. But if a signature story is not compatible with my eclectic muse, what artistic signature could be? For answers, I looked to other arts.

We recognize Vincent van Gogh’s work whether we are looking at his painting of haystacks or of the interior of a room. Michelangelo, accomplished sculptor, also successfully painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. So, changing subject matter and crossing genres can be acceptable.

Actresses Meryl Streep and Glenn Close have portrayed characters in comedies and dramas in both contemporary and historical settings. None of us have any difficulty recognizing their work, even though it is difficult to point to a single signature role for either woman. Do they each have a consistent style? Maybe. What I know for sure is their work has a consistent quality. An audience member who loved Meryl Streep in *Sophie’s Choice* is not necessarily going to love her in *The Manchurian Candidate*, just as an audience member who loved Glenn Close in *The Big Chill* may not have cared for her in *Dangerous Liaisons*, but that won’t keep an audience member who appreciates the quality of their work from ever seeing them again.

So what? Actors are not storytellers. Actors portray someone else. We storytellers are really there. Our audiences have a right to feel they know us from our stories. Only someone unfamiliar with the concept of acting would feel they know an actress because they had seen her in several movies. Because we are present, could our audiences feel they know us through our providing them with consistent, even, signature *quality* instead of providing them with a signature story?

My eclectic muse demands I say yes.

My muse feels trapped when I hear someone describe my body of work based on their experience of one or two stories. Yet, intellectually, I know I am no more responsible for that mistaken impression than the elephant was responsible for the blind men – one touching only trunk, the other only leg – concluding elephants are like a rope and a tree. When the muse is eclectic, no single story provides enough information for an accurate description of a repertoire.

I have abandoned my desire for a signature story. Instead I have embarked on a quest for consistent, high quality telling as my artistic signature. My muse and I remain delightfully engaged in learning how to tell a compelling story. We trust our devotion to our work will serve our audiences well too.

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