

Milbre Burch

STORYTELLING AS AN ARTFORM

Timeless Tales:

Milbre Burch Helps Revive an Age-Old Art



Columbia storyteller Milbre Burch travels the nation to perform her one-woman shows. Her traditional and original stories entertain children and adults alike.
(Photo by Emily Olson)

Milbre Burch’s rich voice fills the room and gradually fades into a whisper. “She can do anything; she can do anything,” Burch says as she tells the tale of a village woman who cuts paper into snowflakes. The captivated audience, composed of third-, fourth- and fifth-graders, listens attentively from the plastic chairs at the Center for Gifted Education. Burch reveals the end of her story — a dragon’s icy breath freezes a greedy emperor for eternity. She sweeps her cupped hand up to show the dragon placing the woman on his back, where the villager still sits today, sending down paper snowflakes. The students burst into eager applause.

A deep believer in the power of a good tale, Burch considers storytelling to be “wired into human beings.” To her, folk tales not only contain the world’s wisdom but also are “a poetic and metaphoric rendering of a human difficulty or human celebration.”

Burch regularly leaves her Columbia home to share these stories with audiences nationwide. She performs one-woman acts, sometimes with props, for audiences in prisons, schools, libraries and theaters. Her stories vary as much as her audiences. Burch uses global folk and fairy tales to convey moral messages, and she also writes her own

stories, which sometimes depict intimate moments from her own life. “In the Family Way,” which she wrote following her father’s death, describes the phone call she received when he died. Weaving poetry, fiction and folk tales, she makes such sensitive issues approachable for her audiences.

“Stories are great tools for giving you a chance to ponder the dilemma of how to be human,” Burch says. “Every story ever created is about that.”

A performer nearly all her life, she tells stories with passion and conviction. In a sense, 51-year-old Burch was born into a family of storytellers. Her grandfather, father, and brothers were all salesmen. “Smooth talk is part of the family business,” she jokes.

In her youth, Burch’s interest wandered from stand-up comedy to dance and drama. During her early 20s she studied mime in her hometown of Atlanta. After immersing herself in silent theater, Burch began to miss language and left mime for group storytelling. She formed a storytelling company in South Carolina, but two years later a move to Rhode Island forced her to rework her material for solo performance. She soon discovered she preferred these one-woman shows, and she’s been a solo storyteller ever since. Calling herself “a recovering mime,” Burch combines gesture and language in her own brand of performance-based storytelling for children and adults.

Nearly 30 years into her career, the demand for her storytelling keeps her busy. The wall calendar in her home office is filled with highlighted boxes marking the days she’s traveling or preparing for an event. Burch has already worked in five states this year, and in early October she heads to Tennessee for the National Storytelling Festival.

Since 1995 Burch has received 10 awards for her work, including the National Storytelling Circle of Excellence Award in 1999, which has been called the Oscar of the storytelling world. She produced 11 recordings on her own label, Kind Crone Productions, and plans to release two more in the next two weeks. In addition to her recordings, she has published various stories and poems.

Burch recently completed a residency in a two-week storytelling program, *The Dragon Breathes Both Fire and Ice*, at the Center for Gifted Education in Columbia. The Missouri Arts Council, which works to bring artists into schools, partially funded the program. In it, students listened and discussed stories with Burch before heading back to their classrooms to create their own writing and artwork with some assistance and encouragement from the storyteller. The elementary students will present their stories and art in a production called *Dragons of the East and West* at the Columbia Public Library on Oct. 20.

The center’s director, Dr. Marte Bock, says she enjoyed the performances by Burch, whom she calls a very engaging storyteller. She says the program provided students with a creative outlet and enhanced their listening and comprehension skills.

Burch encouraged students to listen, read and tell stories. Burch says the program was a way to get kids excited about “the great soup of words and silences out there.”

“It increases their confidence; it increases their fluency and their fluidity with language,” says Burch, whose two daughters, Elizabeth, 9, and Katy, 13, grew up listening to her stories.

Burch had previously explored the connection between storytelling and language in a two-year storytelling collection project for Cotsen Children’s Library in Los Angeles. Starting in 1997, she and her husband, Berkley Hudson, a professor at MU’s School of Journalism, traveled the country to record performances and personal histories of storytellers of all kinds. “A river of language” came out of the mouths of people who grew up listening to stories on the front porch and telling stories themselves, Burch says. “An oral culture has its treasure on its tongue.”

Thirty-three years ago in October storytellers began an attempt to revitalize this oral culture with the first National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tenn. In spite of America’s fast-paced culture, this traditional art form is becoming increasingly popular across the country with festivals in almost every state, including Missouri. As a result, more people are discovering the wisdom of age-old tales.

“We may forget there are old stories that have some answers that are applicable today,” Burch says.

— Lindsey Douthit