

## BRIAN SUTTON-SMITH (1924-2015)

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Brian Sutton-Smith was not only a giant in the field of folklore studies and a pioneering scholar whose vision shaped the interdisciplinary study of play, but also an extremely kind, generous person who vividly remembered his own childhood in New Zealand through insightful works of fiction and vigorously defended children's rights. His studies of the dynamics of play, games, storytelling, and other expressive forms have contributed immeasurably to the study of children's folklore. As a scholar, colleague, and teacher, he has greatly enriched our field.

Brian received New Zealand's first Ph.D. in education in 1954 and traveled to the United States as a Fulbright scholar shortly afterwards. His teaching career began at Bowling Green State University (Ohio) and continued at Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania. His legendary productivity includes more than fifty books, including *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997), and numerous articles. At the Strong Museum in Rochester, patrons can now learn about his work by visiting the Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play.

I first met Brian when he gave a lecture about children's storytelling, based on stories told by children aged two to ten that his team of students had collected in New York; these narratives became the foundation for his *Folkstories of Children* (1981). Before presenting his analysis, he read several stories told by two-year-olds. With careful intonation and facial expressions, he read Alice's story:

The cat went on the cakies  
The cat went on the car  
The cookie was on my nose  
The cookie went on the fireman's hat (1981:48).

What a fantastically mobile face he had! As he read Alice's story, Brian became a convincing facsimile of a two-year-old storyteller: excited, repetitive, and poetic. He took young storytellers very seriously and found parallels between their stories and the stories of adults. In the preface to *The Folkstories of Children* he observes, "The caricature of children's stories, as of adult soap operas, is not unlike the behavior of otherwise sophisticated persons caught in situations of stress and ambiguity" (1981:xi). One of his greatest gifts to children's folklore studies has been his insistence on perceiving play and other expressive forms as vital *human* experiences, rather than experiences limited to the young.

Working closely with his students and colleagues, Brian helped folklorists and scholars in other fields learn about children's culture. In 1977, at the request of Sue Samuelson, his first teaching assistant, he considered the need for more serious attention to children's folklore. His solution to that problem was the formation of a Children's Folklore Society (now the children's folklore section) within the

American Folklore Society. I joined the steering committee for that new society and have participated in the society in a number of ways since then. We owe Brian sincere thanks for the Children's Folklore Society and for *Children's Folklore Review*, which has been published for more than thirty years.

In 1995, *Children's Folklore: A Source Book* was published, co-edited by Brian and other children's folklore scholars. This innovative volume discusses interrelated genres and takes a close look at the complexity and transmission of children's folklore. While writing and revising the book's chapter on narratives, I enjoyed receiving letters from Brian, who was always insightful and positive-spirited. One of the book's most valuable chapters is its last, titled "The Past in the Present: Theoretical Directions for Children's Folklore." I have often reread that chapter, which poses a provocative question: "how is it that our adult culture so typically suppresses the power-related aspects of children's lives so clearly represented in this present document?" (McMahon and Sutton-Smith 1995:308). This question and others raised by Brian's work deserve careful consideration.

When Brian retired from the University of Pennsylvania, my husband and I were invited to attend his retirement party. On a bone-crackingly cold January day, we drove to Philadelphia and arrived just in time for the dinner. It warmed our hearts to find that each plate held a special gift: a toy! Mine was a miniature yellow tractor. I wish I still had that tractor, but I gave it to my son, and it disappeared in his tangle of miniature vehicles. I remember the tractor with pleasure and will always remember Brian, who was a remarkable scholar, a great teacher, and a true friend. His thoughtfulness, brilliance, and appreciation of play will stay with us as we move toward new forms and meanings of children's folklore.

## WORKS CITED

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