

Dorothy Howard: Pioneer Collector of Children's Folklore

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Everyone interested in children's folklore, especially games, owes a debt to Dorothy Mills Howard. Her work bridges the gap between the late nineteenth-century collecting of children's games and the current generation of scholars engaged in serious and systematic childlore research, epitomized by Iona and the late Peter Opie, recognized today as the world's leading collectors of children's folklore.¹ In 1938 Dorothy Howard's New York University doctoral dissertation, "Folk Jingles of American Children: A Collection of Rhymes Used by Children Today," was heralded as pioneering and innovative because it departed so radically from previously accepted canons of scholarship. She collected her material directly from the children themselves rather than observing them as an outsider as her predecessors had done and corroborating this secondhand information with adult memories.

Born July 8, 1902, in rural Texas and named Dorothy Gray Mills (which she preferred to write backwards as a sort of alter ego, Sllim Yarg Yhtorod), she vividly remembered her own childhood, which she chronicled in loving detail in her memoir, *Dorothy's World* (1977). She began her teaching career when she was only seventeen years old, in 1920, during the second year of the great international flu epidemic. When a fourth-grade teacher in a nearby community died, Dorothy was asked to teach the class for the remaining three months of the school year. Her high school teachers tutored her after school, and she graduated on time with her classmates.

She knew that she wanted a career in teaching. In 1923, she graduated from North Texas State Teacher's College in Denton, Texas. In 1925, she married James Howard and had two children, a son and a daughter. From 1923-44 she taught in public schools in Texas, New York, and New Jersey, and also served as a school principal. From 1931-36 she was director of a public summer camp for girls in Westchester County, New York.

She became a folklorist almost by accident. As she recalls in a personal, unpublished memoir:

From 1930-44 I taught in public schools in New York and New Jersey, teaching immigrant children and children of immigrant parents from Norway, Sweden, Finland, Latvia, Germany, and Italy and Greek-speaking children from Turkey, together with those whose immigrant forbears may

have come to America on the Mayflower or on a Dutch ship to New Amsterdam. My job was to teach all the children to read, write, and speak the English language and, in addition, to appreciate the beauty of literature in the English language. There was no book to tell me how to do it, and I was frustrated until I discovered that they were learning English faster on the unsupervised playground than in the classroom. Consequently, defying all prevailing pedagogic canon law, I brought the bouncing balls, skipropes, and marbles into the classroom where I began to construct a new curriculum based on the children's perfect metric play poetry. I had no thought of ever incarcerating my research into a doctoral dissertation. That happened by chance.

Howard thus began her research into what she at first called "children's playlore" as a classroom teacher interested in the teaching-learning process. As she relates the experience (in third person):

As a wandering school teacher, Dorothy in 1930 became a teaching principal in a consolidated rural school in New York State. One problem that soon became her great concern was the fact that most of the children, especially the boys, reached the junior high grades 'hating' poetry. . . . Then one spring day at noon she stood at an open classroom window pondering that problem [and] casually watching children play on an unsupervised playground. Skip ropes were turning; marbles, rolling; balls, bouncing. Gradually she became aware of metaphoric, rhythmic language accompanying the body movements of the children. . . . By the time the bell rang calling the children in, she had counted on her fingers more than a dozen rhymes and formulae; and when the children came to class, rhymes, rhythms, and metaphors of the playground language were discussed. The next day, self-assigned homework was brought in, and by week's end, the class had a collection of more than two hundred playground rhymes. It soon became clear to Dorothy that their joy in poetry came from orchestrated body movements, including the voice. One class discussion led to another: metric and cadenced rhythms; kinds of rhymes and sound-meaning (rollicking and frolicking as opposed to cold and bold). Discussions led to

dramatic choral reading activities, to group creative verse writing, to individual creative writing, and to reading poetry in books, first to limericks, then to 'Jabberwocky,' and gradually to serious poems. (*Dorothy's World*, 287-88)

As she later observed, her "use of the playground as laboratory distinguished her method of study and would. . . determine the character of the results. Her purpose was not that of an antiquarian making a pack rat, museum collection of fossils but that of a school teacher trying to find out what and how children learn and teach each other and why" (293).

She further recalled:

Sometime in 1933 . . . the late Dr. Walter Barnes, Professor of English at New York University, heard about my research in conversation with my sister at a cocktail party. He sent word that he wanted to talk with me about it. And when we talked, he told me that children's playlore was 'folklore' (I did not know that). He introduced me to the works of Gomme, Halliwell, Newell and other nineteenth century folklorists and told me that research in children's folklore was a fallow field unexplored since Newell. I remember exactly what he said, "I am keen about your project." He urged me to continue the investigation and to keep in touch with him.

I continued playing with my schoolchildren on the playground and with my own and neighbor children at home and in the streets. Dr. Barnes and I continued to meet and talk until sometime in 1934. He suggested that the project should develop into a Ph. D. dissertation. With my permission, he said, he would investigate the possibility of persuading the higher powers at N. Y. U., and at Columbia University, as well as at other universities, to his point of view. I agreed.

About a year later he reported. The academic higher powers were unanimous in the view that children's play was not a proper subject for a Ph. D. dissertation. However, N. Y. U. had recently invented a new degree—the Ed. D. He offered to investigate the possibility of getting my project accepted as an Ed. D. dissertation, and I agreed.

Finally, in 1936, Dr. Barnes' scholarly prestige outweighed and overcame the reluctance of the higher powers

at N. Y. U. I was allowed to take the preliminary examinations for the doctorate. And my project was accepted with the stipulation that it be confined to verbal aspects of children's lore and that it be geographically expanded to include rhymes of children throughout the entire United States. Professor Barnes was appointed chairman of my sponsoring committee which included Professor Ambrose L. Suhrie and Professor Hughes Mearns (both were sympathetic and cooperative). That first morning when I reported to begin my preliminary examinations for the doctorate, I opened a door into a very large room and saw some five hundred or more people there, for the same purpose. As my eyes wandered over the room, I saw only two other women. In 1936, there were very few women doctors [i. e. doctorates] of any kind.

In the beginning my attention had been concentrated on verbal aspects of children's play. But as I spent more and more time on the playground, I became more and more aware that children's voices accompanied other body movements and that children moved in group patterns-not chaotically as I had, at first, thought. Then I began to view the playground as an educational institution-as a school operating three feet below adult eye level and invisible to myopic adults.

By the time I was a doctoral candidate, I wanted to limit my study to one school and one group and to expand the inquiry to include the context of the verbal lore: the school (playground and classroom); the home (parent-child and sibling relationships); the church; the community. Professor Barnes had become sympathetic to my view and from 1934 to 1936, he and I searched for then current publications in anthropology, sociology and psychology bearing on my subject. But in those days, physical educationists were in ascendancy in the academic community and their prevailing view was: adult-planned and supervised play, only, was worth serious attention. Following Professor Barnes' advice, I compromised and accepted the dictated formula for doctoral study. He said, "Get that doctorate. Then you can go your own way forever."

In a 1937 article in *The New Yorker*, Howard published some of the poems and jingles from her research, thus giving readers a new insight into the worldview of contemporary American children. In that article, she explained:

The inhabitants of the childish underworld. . . caricature the universe of their elders. They reduce our sophisms to the elementary simplicities-violence, anger, love, and brutal humor. They celebrate the passions which fill their small selves in songs fit for savage races, fit for prehistory.

She continued:

The child, most indefatigable of jokers, finds all experience an occasion for humor. The whole spectacle of the world is comic. Specifically, he finds risible all physical peculiarities, such as fat or ugliness, all offensive smells, sounds, and actions, and love, and intoxication, and wounds and contusions. . . . His art fulfills the definition of art as a criticism of life, for he regards adult experience coldly, transfers it into concepts meaningful to himself, and states them in satirical and critical terms. (32)

In addition to the article in *The New Yorker*, Howard recalled speaking about her research before the annual congress of the National Council of Teachers of English and that the talk was written up by the *New York press*. As a result, she said she received hundreds of letters from readers all over the world, including one from Iona and Peter Opie, who were then a young, unmarried courting couple. She has stayed in touch with the Opies, who in the preface to their innovative and influential *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* referred to her as "one of the originators of this field of study (xvi)."

Howard recalls, "The *New York Times* report also brought a *Time Magazine* reporter scurrying to see my dissertation. Out of thirteen chapters, she was interested in one, 'Taboo Rhymes.' And her article in *Time* implied that I was a pixilated, female schoolteacher sitting on a street curb inviting naughty children to whisper naughty rhymes to me when I should have been in the classroom teaching them their Three R's."² In spite of this harsh and naive criticism, she continued throughout her long career to conduct research and publish the results in numerous folklore journals and other professional magazines in the United States and abroad (see bibliography).

From 1944-1967 Howard was a Professor of English at Frostburg State Teacher's College, Maryland, and served as Chair of the English Department

from 1942-1962. Throughout her teaching career at Frostburg, she assigned her students to collect data from local children and to write careful, detailed autobiographical ethnographies of their own playlife as children.³ She retired from Frostburg in 1967, and from 1967-1969 she was Visiting Professor of English at the University of Nebraska and special consultant in children's literature and playlore in the cooperative Tri-University Project (University of Washington, New York University, and University of Nebraska). She retired from the University of Nebraska in 1969 and lived for many years in a pink adobe facing the desert on the outskirts of Roswell, New Mexico, until advanced age and failing eyesight forced her to make other arrangements.

Dorothy Howard has been a consistent professional voice on behalf of the systematic collection and study of children's folklore. For example, in 1949, recognizing the close relationship between folklore and education, Thelma James, President of the American Folklore Society, appointed a special Committee on Folklore for Children and Young People. Dorothy Howard, with the assistance of Eloise Ramsey, compiled an annotated bibliography, *Folklore for Children and Young People*, which was published in 1952 as Volume 3 of the AFS Bibliographical Series. Because this bibliography emphasized folklore *for* children rather than *by* children, it departed from Dorothy Howard's other work; but it nevertheless reflected the official concern of the American Folklore Society with the otherwise neglected overall field of children's folklore.

Dorothy Howard continued her research, collecting, and publishing of children's lore through a long and productive career. As her interest in the context of children's play increased, she wanted to limit her attention to smaller and smaller groups in order to observe more thoroughly and to probe more deeply into children's minds. To this end, she increased her direct fieldwork with children playing together naturally in groups.

In 1954-55, she enjoyed a Fulbright post-doctoral research grant in Melbourne, Australia, where she was the first to study the traditional play customs of Anglo-Australian children. When she applied for the Fulbright research grant, she intended to study the play life of Australian children in one school in one community. The grant, however, was not approved until she agreed to survey play life in the whole of Australia, an impossible task for one person during one year's fieldwork.

In a presentation she made to the Victorian Institute of Educational Research in 1955, she summarized her findings: ". . . over 700 game names; descriptions of about 400 games; 175 skipping rhymes; 40 counting-out rhymes. . . ; the words for about 15 singing games (with musical notation for 8); a few riddles, tongue-twisters, trick rhymes; hand, finger, and toe rhymes; rhymes for taunting, swearing an oath, bouncing ball; and nonsense rhymes.

All this is folklore-transmitted from children to children without benefit of printed book or adult sponsor." The educators with whom she worked in Australia were astonished and fascinated by the extent of her findings.

During her stay in Australia, she met and encouraged a young researcher and teacher from New Zealand, Brian Sutton-Smith, who followed in her footsteps to become an international authority on children and their traditional behavior. As he recalls:

Dorothy visited me in New Zealand in 1954 shortly after I had returned from my Fulbright two years in the United States. I remember sitting with her on a wind swept beach on those antipodean islands considering that I had chosen the world's most trivial subject but had chosen it also about as far away from any action as it was possible to get. As they say down under, it seems there like all the rest of the world was invited to a party but New Zealand did not get an invitation. In those circumstances, Dorothy's own Fulbright visit to see me was a infusion of heartening lend-lease sufficient to keep me going, until my personal invitation did indeed arrive two years later. (2)

Dr. Sutton-Smith came to the United States to study and went on to teach at Columbia University and later at the University of Pennsylvania.

In recognition of Dorothy Howard's contributions to the field, an archive of children's folklore was established at the Institute of Early Childhood Development in Melbourne, Australia, under the direction of June Factor. The Institute also publishes the bi-annual *Australian Children's Folklore Newsletter*, which was started in 1981 and modeled after the *Children's Folklore Newsletter* (now the *Children 's Folklore Review*) of the Children's Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society.

Continuing her international focus, in 1962-63, while on sabbatical leave, Howard conducted a sociological study of one year in the life of a twelve-year-old boy in Tonalá, Jalisco, Mexico, which was her first opportunity to confine her study to one individual child. In the preface to *Pedro of Tonalá*, she explained how she chose this subject:

I first met Pedro in the summer of 1962 when my anthropologist friend, Francis Gilmore, and I visited her friends in several families, in Tonalá. I chose Pedro Asuncion Munoz Maestro for my study for several reasons: 1) he was the oldest son in his family and an apprentice in the family

pottery industry; 2) he attended the government school; and 3) his family included, in addition to his father, mother, two younger brothers and one older and one younger sister, his grandfather, Maestro Martiniano, who still spoke the language and retold the legends of his ancient Indian ancestors. As a "maestro," he taught the young people of Tonalá the traditional fiesta customs and he was a master potter, teaching Pedro to become a master potter to carry on the family tradition in an ancient pueblo that still clung to tradition. (n. p.)

She kept in touch with Pedro for many years after that research, visiting with him and his wife and children for the last time in 1977.

Of her fieldwork, Howard said:

I visited Pedro at home, and on the playground and in the classroom at school; and, with the family, I attended local mercados, fiestas, and church. On later visits, we attended the mercados and walked about the town to see all the changes. But most of our time together we spent sitting on the Muñoz-Maestro patio talking. As a grown man remembering, Pedro could tell me things he had known as a child but did not have the words to say as a child. (n.p.)

In 1989 she privately published *Pedro of Tonalá*, a work she says was consistently rejected for publication by the "powers-that-be" in the professional folklore community because it lacked what they regarded as a viable theoretical base.

Following her work with Pedro, from 1967 to 1969 in Lincoln, Nebraska, she studied the play life of Ingrid, a girl from the age of two to age four. Her research technique in this project was to play the roles that Ingrid assigned to her. This manuscript remains unpublished.

As previously mentioned, she retired from her position as Professor of English and Chair at Frostburg State Teacher's College in Maryland in 1967. In her retirement she published a personal, autobiographical memoir, *Dorothy's World: Childhood in Sabine Bottom, 1902-1910*, and then turned her attention to a study of the play customs of Amish children in Western Maryland which is tentatively entitled "Work and Play in Pleasant Valley." This project was inspired by research she and her students had undertaken several years before when Howard taught at Frostburg. When she returned to Maryland in the early 1980s to conduct fieldwork, many of these

former students, now parents themselves, assisted her. This important study is unfinished. Her family has encouraged her to write a sequel to *Dorothy's World*, which she has considered calling *Dorothy's Schooldays*, but her failing eyesight interferes with continuing these projects.

Reflecting on her life's work as a woman specializing in the then marginalized and largely ignored field of children's folklore, Dr. Howard says:

Before the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution and ever since my success as a high school debater always debating (against boys), "Resolved, that women have the right to vote"; and ever since Plato introduced me to Socrates (in college), I have searched through history books to learn about the position of women and children throughout the history of the human race. The relationship of adults to children has been a preoccupation in my search. No folklorist-as far as I am aware-has made a study of the folklore of pedagogy.

Reflecting further, Dr. Howard concludes:

Professor Barnes was wrong when he said, "You can go your own way forever." All those who undertake to study human behavior always find their way paved with circumstances beyond their control. In the academic milieu of the 1930's in which it was my lot to live and begin my inquiry into children's playlore, the circumstances beyond my control were not unlike the circumstances beyond the control of Lady Alice Gomme, a proper Victorian lady of the nineteenth century. Lady Gomme was a non-conformist in her day. So have I been in mine. But, happily for me, children, unlike their elders, have welcomed me—a non-conforming adult. No longer do I call myself a folklorist because I do not fit any definition of the word in the perennial debate among vying A. F. S. members. As a contented maverick, I prefer—If I must be labelled—to be called an eclectic schoolteacher or a mugwump pedagog.⁴

In recognition of her vast contribution to the study of children's play, in 1981 The Anthropological Association for the Study of Play (TAASP) presented Dorothy Howard its first Distinguished Achievement award. In his presentation remarks, Brian Sutton-Smith summed up Dorothy Howard's contributions as follows:

Her own story emphasizes the community of kinship relationships and of play. Her emphasis (like that of Dr. Victor Turner's to come) is on *community*. And yet when one looks at her account one is impressed mostly by its intellectuality. . . . There is an early intensive concern with literacy and word meanings. There is a story told with remarkable coolness and rationality. It is a tale of childhood told as if it was a cognitive map. It is written in the way we might have expected Piaget to do it. The same reflective rationality and the gutsiness of a little kid who kicks shins and spits in the butter if she doesn't get her way has clearly assisted Dr. Howard throughout her professional career as a debater, as a union activist, as a member of the AAUP and the American Civil Liberties Union. She has had the rare reward of contriving the dismissal of an authoritarian college president while holding her own job as a lowly professor.

So why did she find children important enough to go out amongst them? I suspect that Dorothy, like many of us, finds in these innocent roots the reminders of that warmth and community of earlier life long gone from much of the modern life of literacy and alienation. In her own writing she protests against that kind of scholarship that buries the study of children's play in academic footnotes and computer output. In her book on Pedro she seeks to establish an intensive play record of one child in a community context with a full description of all surrounding phenomena just as she has done for her own life with *Dorothy's World*. Though contrary to major scholarly trends, her attempt at such an intensive case study with a specific ludic focus continues to make her as much of a pioneer today as she was in 1931. (6)

Howard replied, with characteristic spunk:

Brian praised me for my childhood virtues (kicking shins and spitting in the butter). I kicked four shins (belonging to two older sisters). I spat on people (not in the butter). I was promptly spanked for it and soon learned that spitting on people was not profitable; and I have not spat on anybody since I was four years old. Nevertheless, 'til this day (like

Pavlov's salivating dogs and Skinner's trained pigeons) in the presence of some people, I have to swallow hard and fast.

This, I hope, sufficiently amplifies my pedigree and my childhood virtues and I shall now stop playing with words. If I have been a pioneer on play research (as Brian says), I wish I could have blazed a wider trail through the forests and over the mountains of academic arrogance, ignorance, and indifference for you who now struggle to till the soil, plant and harvest facts and knowledge, wisdom and understanding for the purpose of nourishing and cherishing the young of our land, where children are still chattel property too often unprotected by the Supreme Court of the United States. All I can say to you today in return for the honor you have bestowed on me, is my blessing. Right On! (6-7)

In 1990, the Children's Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society awarded her its Lifetime Achievement Award.

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Dorothy Howard's personal papers, research, and publications have been deposited in the Dorothy Howard Collection of the Rare Books Room, Willis Library, University of North Texas in Denton, her alma mater.

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NOTES

1. In recognition of her unparalleled contribution to the field of children's folklore in 1989 the Children's Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society awarded Iona Opie its first Lifetime Achievement Award. The best biographical study of the Opies and their work is: Jonathan Copp, "Profile: Finding Out Is Better,"

The New Yorker 59 (April 4, 1983): 47-50+. See also: Leonard Marcus, "In Search of 'Childish Things': An Interview with Iona Opie," *Lion and the Unicorn* 13:2 (December, 1989): 7.

2. A search of the files of *Time* and the *New York Times* revealed no such articles.

3. Many of these collections and essays are in the Dorothy Howard Collection at the University of North Texas in Denton.

4. This article is based on numerous interviews and conversations with Dr. Howard and on her brief, unpublished memoir, "Acadaemia, 193 I-Revisited, 1980." My thanks also to Dr. Brian Sutton-Smith, for sharing his files and insights.

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