

Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art, by Lewis Hyde (Book Review)

Reviewed by Margaret Atwood for the L.A. Times.

Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art is Lewis Hyde's second masterpiece of – well, of what? Of wondering; of pertinent story-telling; of pondering. Of making connections that seem both absolutely true and absolutely obvious once Hyde has made them, but which we've somehow never noticed before. He's one of those quirky, eccentric Wise Children the United States sometimes throws up – a sort of Thoreau-cum-anthropologist-cum-seer, asker of naive questions that turn out to be the reverse of naive, fascinated by why we behave the way we do, and why our right hand is often so blind to what our left hand is up to, and why it matters, especially to that elusive entity we've named the soul. Robert Bly calls Hyde a mythologist, which sort of fits, but perhaps he could also be called an illuminationist. In short, he casts light.

It's hard to discuss Trickster Makes This World apart from Hyde's first such syncretic masterpiece, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. The classification on *The Gift's* back cover reads "Literary Criticism/Sociology," but I expect many distraught bookstore workers have attempted to jam it also into "Anthropology," "Economics," "Theology," or "Philosophy." *The Gift* was first published in 1979, and has been in print ever since. It passes from hand to hand, primarily the hands of those in any way connected with the arts, but also the hands of all who are interested in the sometimes arbitrary values placed on the material goods of this world. The primary question it poses is simple: Why is a poet, in our society, unlikely ever to be rich? Or, in another form: What is it about a series of romance novels designed entirely through market research that leads us to believe none of them will ever be a work of art? Or else: What is Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" worth in dollar terms? In the course of explaining why the answer is both nothing and it's priceless, Hyde stitches together not only folktale and impressive erudition, but biographical anecdote, personal observation, and anything else he finds useful, and on this flying patchwork he covers an immense amount of essential human ground.

By the pressures of the market economy we live in, he says, we've been fooled into believing that there is only one way in which things are exchanged: through money transactions, or buying and selling. Yet on some level we know there's another economy at work in human societies: the gift economy, which has quite different rules and consequences. It's the relation between the two economies that *The Gift* explores. In the course of reading it, we discover how "Indian givers" got their undeserved name, why usury developed the way it did, why you don't normally charge for donating a kidney to your brother, why women were traditionally "given" in marriage and sons were "given" by mothers in war, and why the Welsh passed free meals over the coffins of their dead.

Money transactions create no bonds of love or gratitude, and imply no obligations. Gifts, on the other hand, are reciprocal, and also emotionally loaded: market exchanges move through the bank account, gifts through the heart. Where the gift circulates, spiritual life flourishes. All societies exist in both economies, says Hyde, but each tends to value one economy over the other. Our own society has overemphasized the market and denied the gift, and the result is stagnant wealth on the one hand and spiritual death and material poverty on the other.

The artist belongs primarily to the gift economy; without that element of creation which arrives uncommanded and cannot be bought, the work is unlikely to be alive. *The Gift* is the best book I

know of for the aspiring young, for talented but unacknowledged creators, or even for those who have achieved material success and are worried that this means they've sold out. It gets at the core of their dilemma: how to maintain yourself alive in the world of money, when the essential part of what you do cannot be bought or sold. All literary and theatrical and film agents should read this book: they may be surprised to learn what a mythological role they play, as guardians of the threshold that separates gift from dollar transaction, but that must somehow be crossed if the artist is to eat. *The Gift* should also be read by every patron, every legislator, and every die-hard opponent of arts funding. It lights up the dark corners.

Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art picks up a motif from *The Gift*, in which the god Hermes, or Mercury, makes an appearance as that part of the human imagination which governs quick changes, and also quick money exchanges. If you pray to Hermes, Hyde notes, you'll get action, but it will be action with no moral strings attached, and no guarantees: Hermes goes in for one-night stands. (He's also the patron of thieves, liars, crossroads, and footloose wandering, and the guide for souls on their way to the Underworld. In his role as messenger to the gods, he used to appear on the cover of our telephone book, with his midsection modestly wreathed in trunk-line cables.)

As Hyde points out, Hermes has many brothers in cultures world-wide. Coyote and Raven in North America, Eshu and Legba in Africa, the Monkey King in China, Krishna in India, not to mention Brer Rabbit of the American South – these are a few of the trickster figures whose devious ways Hyde explores. (Why are they all male? That would be telling. Read on!) In every culture that has a trickster god, it's the other gods who have made the various forms of perfection, but it's the Trickster who's responsible for the changes – the mistakes, if you like – that have brought about the sometimes deplorable mess and the sometimes joyful muddle of this world as it is.

And what an ambiguous creature Trickster is! He's cunning personified, a sleight-of-hand artist and a cheat, yet through his overweening curiosity and his tendency to meddle in things about which he lacks true knowledge, he often makes a fool of himself. He steals fire and burns his fingers. He lives by his wits, yet he falls into traps. He's subversive in that he disrupts conventions, and transgressive because he crosses forbidden boundaries, yet he displays no overtly high and solemn purpose in these activities. He's a god, but a god of dirt and mixture, and of shameless, unsanctioned sex. He's a teller of lies, but of lies without malice. He lies in order to cover up his thefts – thefts made from the motive of simple appetite, or simply for the fun of stealing – or merely to fool people, or concoct stories, or stir things up. "Trickster," says Hyde, "feels no anxiety when he deceives. ... He ... can tell his lies with creative abandon, charm, playfulness, and by that affirm the pleasures of fabulation." (71) As Hyde says, "... almost everything that can be said about psychopaths can also be said about tricksters," (158), although the reverse is not the case. "Trickster is among other things the gatekeeper who opens the door into the next world; those who mistake him for a psychopath never even know such a door exists." (159)

What is "the next world"? It might be the Underworld, or the world of the imagination, or – in real-life terms – the unobtainable, the denied, the forbidden: other cultures, other nations, other forms of sexuality, other classes and races. Hyde illustrates his theme, not only with tales of the ancient gods and heroes, but also with the work of present-day creators such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Allen Ginsberg – crossers of boundaries themselves, and explorers of the crossing – and with the real people in whom the spirit of trickster has been incarnate. Foremost among these is Frederick Douglas, who in the nineteenth century crossed the perilous line dividing black from white, slave from free man, and in doing so turned the assumptions that

governed such divisions upside-down. Such figures remind us that it's Odysseus the trickster who tells a lie good enough to get his men alive out of the monster Cyclops' cave, and Prometheus the trickster who steals fire from the gods and makes a gift of it to man. Through his daring and wiliness, Trickster too can be a hero.

The pleasures of fabulation, the charming and playful lie – this line of thought leads Hyde to the last link in his subtitle, the connection of the trickster to art. Hyde reminds us that the wall between the artist and that American favourite son, the con-artist, can be a thin one indeed; that craft and crafty rub shoulders; and that the words artifice, artifact, articulation and art all come from the same ancient root, a word meaning to join, to fit, and to make. (254) If it's a seamless whole you want, pray to Apollo, who sets the limits within which such a work can exist. Tricksters, however, stand where the door swings open on its hinges and the horizon expands: they operate where things are joined together, and thus can also come apart.

At the end of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, cunning is one of the virtues invoked, and it's the Daedalus, maker of mazes, to whom Stephen Dedalus addresses his invocation: "Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead;" we can guess by this that Joyce has crafty disruption on his mind. Tricksters aren't the only kind of artists that exist, but there's a healthy population of trickster artists. Picasso and Marcel Duchamp – he of the urinal as found art – are just a couple of those on Hyde's list. Such artists can be mere lightweight playful brats, but they can also be those who come along when a tradition has become too set in its ways, too orderly, too Apollonian, and shake it out of its rut. And artists of whatever sort need Trickster's help from time to time: when you're blocked or stuck, take an aimless walk and let your mind off its leash, and call on Trickster. He's the opener of dreams, of roads, and of possibilities. Like T.S. Eliot and Walt Whitman, both apple-cart upsetters in their day, he can tell you there are diamonds in the mud.

I've suggested just a few of the reasons why *Trickster Makes This World* will be as widely read by those in the arts as *The Gift* has been, but there are lots of other reasons, and lots of reasons too why this book should be read by anyone interested in the grand and squalid matter of all things human. Hyde's book is a glorious grab-bag stuffed with necessary loot, a joyful plum pudding rich in treasures. Once more, we are indebted to him.

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