

# *Jack and the Fire Dragon*

Author Gail E. Haley, an autobiography



I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina and brought up in Shuffletown, a small country community about ten miles north of Charlotte. My neighbors were self-sufficient farmers who still plowed their fields with mules. The women made their own soap and candles and preserved food by canning, smoking and drying.

The men cut down trees with axes or crosscut saws, when they had the help of a neighbor or son old enough to pull the heavy weight. They used the wood to make houses, barns, furniture, fences, milk churns, buckets or spoons. Most heating and cooking were done with wood stoves or fireplaces. The women got fabric for sewing, clothing, curtains or quilts from feed sacks that came in printed patterns.

And I learned an important lesson for life – “ye ain’t pore if he can make what ye need.”

My grandparents were both born in King’s Mountain, North Carolina, and the brogue they spoke was very close to the dialect of people in Northern England. My grandfather’s family name was Bell, and as a third generation descendant of a Scottish clan, I am still allowed to wear the family tartan.

The other side of my life was very different. My father’s family members came from Ohio and were third generation Germans. My father was an artist, and in my early years, he worked at the Charlotte Observer as art director.

After my Saturday morning tap dance and marimba lesson, I would ride a city bus back to the Observer and spend the rest of the day in the art department of the newspaper. I fell in love with the mystical process of creating art that was ready to be processed for reproduction. I envied my father and other artists who got to use rubber cement, India ink, art gum and kneaded erasers. I also hung around with the writers of Carolina news, the fashion editors and others who worked on old upright typewriters with cloth ribbons. I can still recall the way those machines smelled. Then I might be allowed to take the edited text down to the linotype operator who would set the story in hot lead. The Observer was still printed by letterpress or raised type.

On Sunday morning, families all over the city and country environs would open the paper, and they would see and read the stories, ads and other editorial material I had seen during its creation. It was this knowledge that changed my life, the ability to give form to material that came from a person’s mind and imagination.

My other love was reading. I devoured books, discovered research and spent hours haunting the old stacks of the public library in pursuit of some fact or idea. Books were my windows to the world. The library was my source of all knowledge.

By the time I was eight years old, I knew that I wanted to write and illustrate children’s books, and all my subsequent dreams and efforts were steps to that end.

After art school, I attended the University of Virginia where I had a teachers who encouraged me to pursue my dream. Although I was unable to sell a book on my first trip to New York in 1962, I was so determined about my life’s work that I borrowed \$500 from the bank and published my own first book, *My Kingdom for a Dragon*. It was printed from woodcuts on special paper. The typeface for the cover was handmade. I collaged and bound it myself. I took it to Washington to get a copyright and sold enough copies to Brentano’s bookstore in Washington that same day to pay the bank back.

Since that time, I have lived in New York City, the Caribbean and London (for eight years).

When I returned to the United States with two children, two cats and very little money, I was able to find a job at Appalachian State University as Writer in Residence. I knew that I wanted to be able to study the Jack Tales and hear them from some of the old mountain people who had learned them in the oral tradition, handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. These people were very like the people I had known as a child. It was easy to lose my English accent and settle down into “country” speech again.

My years in England had made it clear that much of the language used among mountain folk – the contractions, abbreviations and rhythms – had survived over two hundred years since their ancestors came to this country from the British Isles.

Linguists have said that this speech reflects the language used by Chaucer and Shakespeare, and I could certainly compare it to Cockney and the pronunciations of my “Geordie” neighbors from the northern counties of England.

# *Jack and the Fire Dragon*

Author Gail E. Haley, an autobiography, continued



People who do not understand the independent and proud nature of mountain people call them “hillbillies” and believe them to be ignorant. Those who do not know any better believe that “bad English” passes for mountain speech. Such people will use ya’ll when referring to one person and this is incorrect usage. The word is a contraction of “you all,” meaning more than one person.

Part of my interest in the Jack Tales was to translate the old stories that reflected a pre-industrial, agricultural lifestyle. People who did not grow up in such a culture need to be reminded of the self-sufficiency required to survive in this terrain almost a century ago. City children may not understand what a calamity it was for a cow to go dry, crops to fail or stored food to be spoiled by a flood, mold or “varmint.”

I was happy to return to *Jack the Fire Dragon* as a longer version of the story than the one I originally retold as a picture book in 1988. No matter how many times I re-read these stories, I always find new meanings in them. Perhaps this is because there were originally told to people of all ages when the community gathered round the storyteller. So, if the stories are told to children, Jack keeps “comin’ young,” but as the audience grows older and wiser, so does Jack. This is part of the magic of storytelling, and it helps explain why people want to hear the old stories over and over again.

I have two grownup children, Geoffrey and Marguerite who enjoyed these stories when they were young. My two grandchildren, Ellen and Wyatt, are learning to love these stories as well.

I live in farming country between Blowing Rock and Lenoir, North Carolina, with five cats, a cocker spaniel and various wild critters who stop by for a snack and a chat from time to time.

For more about Gail Haley, visit [www.gailehaley.com](http://www.gailehaley.com).