

"A Mesquakie Folk Tale" in *The Goldfinch*, September 1991

A Mesquakie Folk Tale

The original inhabitants of Iowa lived in peace with the environment. The Sauk and Mesquakie Indians teach children about plants and animals through the stories they tell.

Most Mesquakies (mes-KWAHK-ees) believe that the Earth is very special. "I was taught that everything is sacred-the animals, the birds, the trees, even rocks," said Albert Cloud, a Mesquakie Indian. "I was taught not to fear the weather but to welcome it. When it would rain or snow or when the winds would blow, I was taught to go out and welcome weather."

Mesquakie children learn about the environment from stories and songs that are handed down orally (spoken aloud) by their elders. Through these folk tales, children learn what one important aspect of being a Mesquakie is all about-living in peace with the Earth.

Read the following folk tale about a Deer, lying dead in a forest, and four animals-an Eagle, a Panther, a Tarantula, and an unknown creature-gathered around the body. One day the eagle, panther, tarantula, and mystery animal find the dead deer. What is the lesson of the story?

They were quarreling over the division of the Deer. One wanted this part, another wanted that, and they had not yet come to an agreement when the man appeared in their midst.

They suddenly fell into silence. Presently the man put questions to them. "Tarantula, did you kill it?"

"No."

"Eagle, did you kill it?"

"No."

"And [to the mystery creature] did you kill it?"

"No."

He found on further questioning that they had found the Deer already dead, but he did not learn who had found it first. Then he upbraided them for quarreling. At the same time, he began to cut up the Deer in four equal shares.

The way he did it was to split the Deer in half from the head to the tail, then each half was cut in two again. He gave a part of each of the four, and they went their several ways feeling kindly towards one another and to the man who had settled their dispute.