

Every Pair of Hands

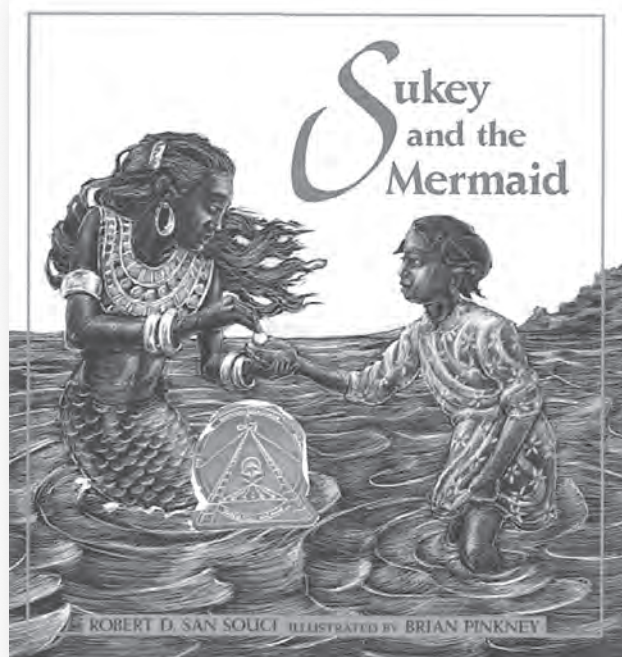
~ Anne Birney and Leslie Wetzonis Woolverton

It was such a joy to attend the East Coast WECAN conference in February 2023, surrounded by friends and colleagues. One of the most moving aspects of the conference for me was the puppet play “Harriet and the Stars.” The artistry, storytelling, and techniques used by the talented puppeteers were incredible, and the natural movement of the puppets truly brought the characters to life on the stage. My colleagues and I love puppetry, and when the play ended we all had the same questions: “How did they make the arms and hands?” “How did they make the puppets move so naturally?” We were excited and wanted to learn more.

After hearing the keynote by Leslie Wetzonis Woolverton and Lynn Turner, two of the puppeteers, I felt encouraged by their warmth to approach Leslie when I saw her walking across the Green Meadow campus. We talked for a few moments, and she answered my questions and offered to follow up with me. I also found a brief opportunity to see the puppets at the end of the weekend, and Lynn was so kind as to answer my questions, letting me hold one of the puppets and take some pictures to inspire me in bringing beautiful puppets like theirs to our school.

A few weeks after the conference I found Leslie’s email and reached out to her. I was nervous at first. Reaching out to conference presenters and those I look up to in the Waldorf community almost feels like talking to a celebrity, but Leslie was friendly and welcoming. She immediately opened up a line of communication to answer my questions, and through a series of conversations and Zoom calls made me and my colleagues a generous offer. She had found a new story that inspired her, and wondered if we would like to join her in making puppets for it. That was how our long-distance journey to bring “Sukey and the Mermaid” to life began.

Sukey and the Mermaid, by Robert D. San Souci, is the story of a little girl living on the Sea Islands in South Carolina. She lives with her mother and stepfather, Mister Jones, a “bossy, do-nothing man” who makes her work every morning starting at dawn. One day when Mister Jones isn’t looking, Sukey runs to the beach and sings a little song which calls up Mama Jo, a beautiful, brown-skinned mermaid, from the sea. Time and again Sukey returns to the beach, and one



day travels with Mama Jo to her magical underwater kingdom. Over time she begins to miss her family and returns to the human world. She finds that time has passed and that she is a grown woman. Sukey soon plans to marry, but the night before the wedding Mister Jones kills Sukey’s fiancé and tries to steal her dowry, a treasure gifted to her by Mama Jo. Mama Jo comes to Sukey a final time and gives her a pearl to heal her beloved, then brings a storm that swallows Mister Jones. He is gone, once and for all. Sukey, her husband, and her mother live happily ever after, though she never sees Mama Jo again.

In the afterword of *Sukey and the Mermaid* the author describes his process of discovering and researching this story. San Souci found a brief folktale about a Black mermaid in a book called *Folk-Lore of the Sea Islands, South Carolina*, which was published in 1923. Though they are few, he found other authenticated African-American folktales about mermaids. He traced the root of the Sea Islands story and uncovered a similar story in Caribbean folklore. This led him to a tale of a young girl’s encounter with a female water-spirit that came from West Africa. Using

these pieces he wrote *Sukey and the Mermaid*, the basis of our puppet play.

When Leslie brought this story to us I was inspired right away. I grew up in the 1990s and *The Little Mermaid* was my favorite Disney movie growing up. When I heard about the new live-action remake I couldn't wait for it to come out. However, soon after it was announced, there was racist backlash against the movie and its star, Halle Bailey. The trailer got millions of dislikes on YouTube and internet trolls decried the casting of a Black actress in this role, commenting online under the hashtag #notmyariel. I got a copy of *Sukey and the Mermaid* from the library, and after reading the story and admiring the beautiful scratchboard illustrations by Brian Pinkney, I thought that the time could not be better to expose the children at our school, most of whom are white, to a story about a "beautiful brown-skinned mermaid."

I teach a mixed-age kindergarten class at the Rudolf Steiner School of Ann Arbor, and we have worked hard to build a rich tradition of puppetry in our Early Childhood program. When I arrived at the school eight years ago I was new to making puppets, but with the support of experienced colleagues, I have helped create and perform many puppet shows, along with making marionettes, standing puppets, and rod puppets. We have adapted stories from books and fairy tales and written some of our own. But in our work with Leslie she brought a deeper relationship with the story and people we are portraying in this tale.

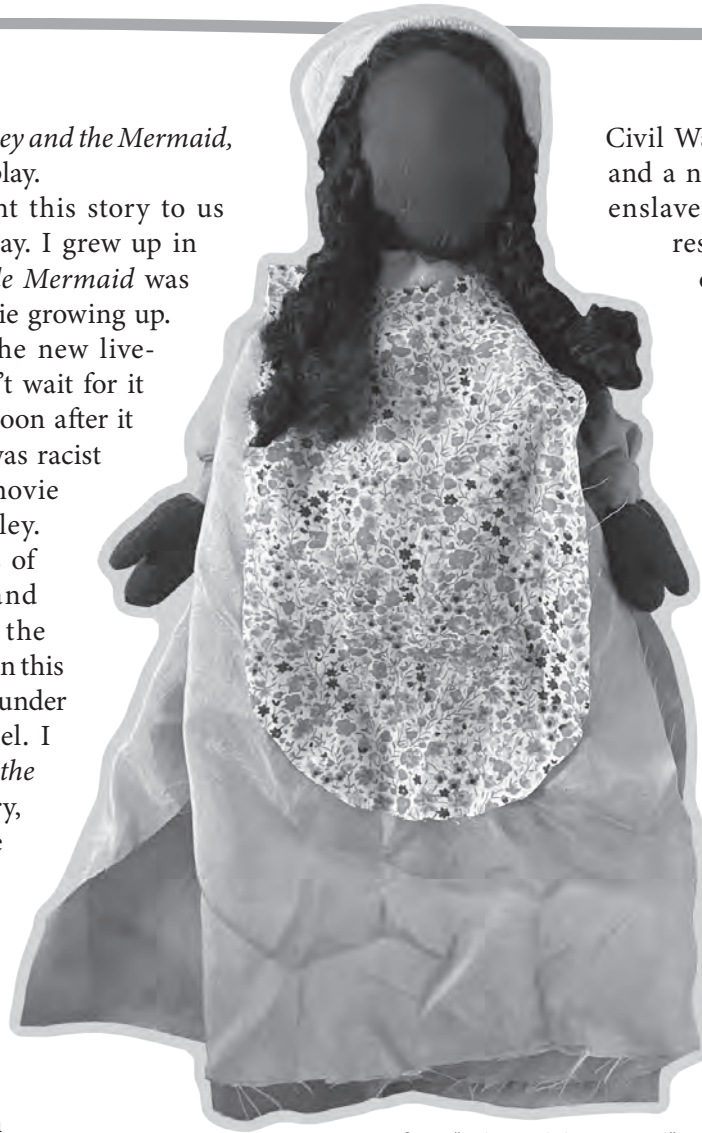
Leslie taught us about her process of researching a story and learning the history and biography of the people she will portray. *Sukey and the Mermaid* is set in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, and while the exact time frame isn't specified we imagined it to take place in the late 1800s, shortly after the end of the

Civil War, amidst Reconstruction and a new "freedom" for formerly enslaved people. We began our research by simply looking online at images of the Sea Islands and the people there. We continued by delving deeper into these sites and reading a number of books on the Gullah, as the people in this area came to be known, and their culture. The Gullah people were enslaved and brought to the United States from many West African countries. Over time they developed a common language so that people who came from different countries and regions could communicate. By blending languages from over twenty West African languages as well as English, the Gullah language was formed, and is still spoken

by some inhabitants of the

region today. Due to their relative isolation, the Gullah preserved much of their culture, more so than other groups of formerly enslaved people in the United States.

We learned about the tradition of making beautifully woven sweetgrass coil baskets that continues in this region to this day. We learned that rice and indigo were some of the many crops that would have been grown at the time in this area. We researched what livelihoods were common, and how the community grew and thrived. We looked at pictures of hairstyles of the time, and discovered what clothing would have been worn and what materials it would have been made from. We saw what peoples' homes would have looked like, as well as the natural world surrounding them. We learned about some Gullah spiritual beliefs, stories, music and traditional medicines. This deep dive has brought about a connection to this story and these characters that I



A puppet from "*Sukey and the Mermaid*"

have never had before with a puppet play or tale that I have brought to the children in my classroom.

In making these puppets, another area that we found important to discuss was skin color. Over the past several years we have prioritized making puppets and dolls with a variety of skin tones to have in our classrooms. The topic of representation is one that is important to our faculty and one that we have discussed in depth in the past. But for this play it felt especially important to think carefully about the shades of brown we used and how we portrayed each character. Who would have dark coffee colored skin? Which character's skin would be a lighter caramel color? What color hair would they have? In a story like this one where we were portraying an innocent little girl, a majestic mermaid, and an "evil" stepfather we wanted to make these choices carefully and with intention.

Another aspect of the process that has been different and special is how our group from Michigan has worked with Leslie, who lives in Maryland. It has been quite a journey to create this puppet play in such a different way, collaborating long-distance with a colleague we have barely met in person. Though many of us began to dread Zoom in the depths of the pandemic, it has become a useful tool for making opportunities that otherwise would be impossible, possible. Leslie has become a friend and collaborator, generously sharing her time and resources as we traded puppetry materials back and forth by mail, talked on the phone, and worked together via email and Zoom calls with the full group of puppeteers here in Ann Arbor. This has been a unique experience for us, but one that could be replicated by other schools. Working in this way could be an opportunity to share our skills in different areas with colleagues who are far away but share the same goals.

At the time of writing this article our work is still not done. Several of the puppets are complete, but we are still busy adding layers to their clothing and perfecting their hair and accessories. We are getting ready to join Leslie in working on the story, and blocking it in a way that is practical for performing it on stage for kindergarten age children. She is teaching us about the best use of "fairy tale language" and the ideal performance times for different age groups. We will cut and change parts, while staying true to the story as it was written. We are building new stages, and when they are complete we will string the marionettes,

work on building the scenery, and then begin the work of practicing. This will lead to tweaking and redrafting the story, probably several times, to make it work in a practical way for a performance. This project has been and will continue to be a labor of love and I can't wait to see it come to life. ♦

—Anne Birney

The arts of puppetry and storytelling can bring the most beautiful results that will bear fruits of imagination for years and decades to come. Storytelling is a healing art that soothes the hearts of us all, both young and old. As we return to sharing tales and stories through puppetry in our classrooms and our school communities, we can begin to showcase hope, courage, and love, highlighting cultural tales of the world. This artistic endeavor offers insights into how we all can begin to be *of the world* in times that have become so isolating and divided. We can expand our work together through authentic interest and relationship, a fundamental aspect of Waldorf education. This happens through collaboration, when we reach out to one another in creativity and inspiration.

At the WECAN Conference in February 2023, the WIDEN Arts puppetry troupe shared "Harriet and the Stars," a story I created. The beauty and imaginations of the story came out of a full collaborative spirit, as we created the marionettes and envisioned how the story would unfold with reverence, rhythm, and repetition to meet kindergarten-aged children. The music, multiple drafts of story blocking, and most of all trust from many colleagues of our troupe brought the story to life. As we progressed from written words on paper to creating a full puppetry version, a true fairytale of beauty amongst historical hardship could unfold. And with work from many pairs of hands belonging to people who believed in the heart of my story, we were all able to create this offering together.

During the conference, Anne Birney reached out, wanting to explore not only the depth of the performance but the artistry behind the short performance that she knew had taken so many months to create. Anne reached out to me again by email in the early spring and our collaboration with Anne and her colleagues at the Rudolf Steiner School of Ann Arbor began.

I had become enamored with another story by Robert D. San Souci, "The Talking Eggs," that was to

be performed by the Early Childhood puppetry troupe at the Waldorf Baltimore School. During my site visit, I was invited to sit in on a rehearsal and was instantly inspired by the artistry of their troupe and their showcasing of the tale with such magical puppetry. Looking for a new puppetry offering to share, I found San Souci's book *Sukey and the Mermaid*.

This particular story needed to be told when I read about so much pushback on the idea of a "black" mermaid in Walt Disney's upcoming release of *The Little Mermaid*. I was disheartened by so much negativity, vitriolic disgust, and hatred. Could this tale be as endearing to young children today, as it had been for many adults who had been children at the time of Disney's earlier cartoon version? There was actual alarm that a woman of color would become the selected actress for this traditional story. I researched all that I could on black mermaids and folklore, and I discovered mermaids in just about every culture, gender, and ethnicity. I also went to the version by Hans Christian Andersen to try to explain such a reaction. What I found time and time again was beauty and hope, with room for us all to hold love within our hearts, in both Andersen's original story and in other mermaid tales.

As adults teaching young children, we may become too engrossed in *what it is* we are bringing as individuals to our work, not realizing how important collaboration is to our process. However, when we

want to build schools, communities, and collectiveness with fellow educators, far better results will come when varied insights and collective perspectives can be given. Collaborative artistic work, arising out of many lived experiences and sources of inspiration, will build our work and deepen what we hold as pictures that are not limiting. A collaborative energy or healing spirit that seeks to support all that young children need will emerge when we move out of familiar bubbles, researching folklore that meets the needs and addresses the questions of our times.

Through our collective research on this specific tale and the Gullah people of South Carolina, a new story is being born. Through trusting the process as we discuss comfortable and uncomfortable questions, we are building a new vision to offer. We are all honoring this tale in the visuals we are creating. Beautiful, varied shades in the skin tones of the marionettes, their clothing, and a sense of the Georgia Sea Coast will be showcased. And there is an evil stepfather in this fairy tale, an archetype both old and new. Our commitment to this work and story has inspired us all, and we look forward to the ongoing creation and eventual sharing of this tale.

Most of all, I am so grateful to have become friends with new colleagues. When this article is published, the performance of our collaborative creation at the 2024 WECAN Conference will be behind us. We will have brought collective insights into our workshop



Set for the puppet play "Sukey and the Mermaid"

offering, through which we hope to inspire others towards a unique collaborative process. Stories are healing, and sharing cultural tales will deepen this journey as deep as the sea. Through this amazing art we hope to inspire all to trust in the process that moves us through an imaginative transformation to show forth the fruits of love. Thank you, Anne, and all who shared in this amazing journey! ♦

—Leslie Wetzonis Woolverton

Anne Birney *has been an early childhood teacher at the Rudolf Steiner School of Ann Arbor for the last nine years. She has a B.S. in Education from the University of Oregon and graduated from the Waldorf Institute of Southeastern Michigan. Anne has been working with children for over twenty years and is still surprised and delighted by the humor and joy that they bring to the classroom each day.*

Leslie Wetzonis Woolverton *is an WECAN I.D.E.A coordinator, WECAN Research Group member, and co-founder of WIDEN Arts. She shares her experience as Waldorf parent/child and nursery teacher and expertise with DEIB issues as core and guest faculty for Sound Circle, Sophia's Hearth and other WECAN approved training institutes. She serves as mentor to new lead teachers and assistants as well. Leslie authored and presented the "Harriet and the Stars" puppet play at the 2023 WECAN Conference, where she was also a keynote speaker alongside her colleagues. She additionally presents workshops on DEIB, inclusive storytelling, and puppetry.*