

Guide to the Mythology in *When You Trap a Tiger*

Many readers have asked about the myths in *When You Trap a Tiger*, and I'm so excited that people want to learn more about Korean folklore. With that in mind, I want to be as clear as possible about the stories in this book. With the exception of the [Sun + Moon story](#) in chapter 5, the stories in *When You Trap a Tiger* are not straightforward myth retellings (and even that story is slightly adapted).

In my early drafts, I intended to do a pure retelling of traditional tales, but as the book grew, the stories in them transformed. I was telling a story about the way narratives shapeshift over generations—so naturally, the folktales I was writing about took on new forms and new life. As I wrote, I realized that rewriting traditional tales would not work for this book; I needed to engage with tradition, question it, and build off of it.

This additional context isn't necessary for reading *WYTAT*, but if you want to understand how this book connects with the broader tradition of Korean myths (to use in classrooms or otherwise), I've laid out the original tales along with some of the changes I made.

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HALMONI'S STORY (Chapter 8)

Original Korean Myth: [The Story Spirits](#)

Here, a young boy is captivated by folktales—so captivated that he doesn't want to share them. To keep anybody else from hearing the stories, he traps them in a bag so they can't escape.

One night, while the boy sleeps, his servant walks past his room and hears voices. These voices belong to the stories in the bag—who are conspiring against the boy. The stories plot revenge by

using all the dangerous weapons from their tales (poison, a hot poker, snakes.) The servant tells the boy about these plans, and the boy sets the stories free.

I was compelled by the idea that someone could steal stories and trap them, but I wondered if a story thief might have a motivation beyond selfishness. Halmoni's story came from this question of motivation. Stories are not just about the stories themselves; they are also about the storyteller. Who gets to tell stories, about whom, and why? History is so often controlled by those in power, and women do not always get to tell their own stories. Though her actions may have been misguided, perhaps stealing and hiding the stories was the only way Halmoni knew how to take control of her own narrative.

To connect this myth with the tiger lore, I added the idea of tigers guarding stories, and the stories lighting the sky as stars. I also added the idea that the star stories were created by the sky princess as a way to feel less lonely. That same sky princess makes appearances in the other *WYTAT* stories as well.

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THE STAR JAR STORIES

The first star jar story (chapter 22), introduces a shapeshifting tiger girl. While this isn't based on one specific folktale, there's a long tradition of shapeshifting women in Korean folklore. (And not only in Korean tales—the idea of shapeshifting women has inspired fear and awe globally.) Most shapeshifters in Korean lore are nine-tailed foxes ([kumiho](#))--one of the most powerful and dangerous Korean monsters. But I also read a few folktales about men who fell in love with human women, only to realize they were actually tigers in disguise.

I was drawn to the idea of living a double life and I wanted to examine what shapeshifting might symbolize, both in mythic times and more contemporary times. That duality would read differently to different people, based on particular circumstances.

For instance, that duality can sometimes be, for Asian Americans (and in my experience, mixed race Asian Americans), the cultural tug-of-war between Asia and America. Or it can be the tension between being the quiet, obedient girl people expect, and the girl full of burning desires trapped inside. It can also represent the tender pain of coming of age, the safety of childhood versus the wild unknown of adulthood. So many of us are torn between pieces of ourselves. So many of us are, in fact, shapeshifters.

And though shapeshifting is often depicted as dangerous or deceitful in folklore and pop culture, I wanted to write these stories in a way that raised a question: What if we didn't always have to choose? What if, sometimes, we could be both? What if that made us whole?

Additionally, while it's not a direct retelling, the interaction between the sky god and the tiger girl was strongly influenced by the Korean origin myth—as were many of the star jar stories in *WYTAT*.

Original Myth: [The Korean Origin Story](#)

Long, long ago, there was a heavenly prince who ruled over Earth. His job was easy enough until a bear and a tiger, tired of their wild lives, asked him to turn them human. This request was unprecedented, but the prince told them that if they lived in a cave for one hundred days and ate only mugwort and garlic, they would become women.

The bear succeeded, and the prince rewarded her with a human body. Together, they created the Korean people. But the tiger was impatient. She ran out of the cave and was doomed to a life of stalking through the forest as a beast, alone.

I heard this story about halfway through the writing process and was struck by it. Because if the bear represents Korean women—or a version of womanhood that means suffering and silent endurance—what, then, of the tiger? What about the woman who refused to suffer and was

banished for it? What would happen if she came back? What would she want, and what story would she tell?

I wrote more about this myth in [my author's note](#), and this folktale became an entry point for me to understand the tiger's motivations and backstory.

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The second star jar story (chapter 27) takes place generations later, when a descendant of that tiger girl begins to come into her own shapeshifting power. Though her grandmother tells her to fight it, the girl cannot. She escapes her childhood home and crosses the sea, trying to find herself, her mother, her history. Again, I was exploring themes of shapeshifting, and this story references a tale I heard growing up—a story that I can't find online and is likely distorted by time and memory.

In that folktale, a witch disguises herself as a man's wife, but when the witch brings him tea in the evening, his real wife is already standing there. Horrified, the man realizes he cannot tell them apart. They look identical. The husband only discovers the witch when he grabs her hand. Her skin feels coarse, rather than smooth like it appears to be. Caught, she jumps out the window and runs away.

I was drawn again to the idea of a magical woman as something to be feared—and the unexpectedness and mistrust of power in a woman's body. Though I changed the premise of this folktale, I wove a lot of its imagery into this star jar story.

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LILY'S STORY (chapter 43)

Lily's story at the end of the book was my way of tying all the stories in *WYTAT* together. I wanted to weave all these references and myths into a single tale, and I hoped to use that tale to comment on storytelling in general. I also included references to some beloved American picture books in these stories because I wanted to show the way different cultural touchstones blend together—something that feels so central to my experience as an Asian American.

In many ways, the star jar stories in *WYTAT* were inspired by hearing these original folktales and thinking, *there must be more to the story*. And this book is less a retelling of Korean stories, and more my response to them.

If you're interested in reading more of the original Korean folktales, here are some resources:

Korean Folk & Fairy Tales by Suzanne Crowder Han

The Story Bag: A Collection of Korean Folktales by Kim So-un

[This list of Korean folktale books for kids](#), by Pragmatic Mom