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Southern Living®

Georgia Tale-teller

Cuban born, Georgia reared, and blessed with an ear for a good story, Tersi Agra Bendiburg brings multicultural textures to tales drawn from throughout the Americas.

She appears, at first glance, surprisingly timid. The petite brunette—her eyes wide, her lips curled in a shy smile, her hands clutching a straw basket—slips quietly into a packed elementary school library. Then Tersi Agra Bendiburg begins to speak in Spanish-accented English, her forceful personality emerging like a turtle from its shell. Fidgety students grow still, boisterous ones fall silent, and the magic begins.

With more voices than Babylon and more tales than Scheherazade, Tersi launches into spellbinding stories drawn from her multicultural background and from deep wells of tradition. Born in Cuba to a family prone to weaving words, and living in Georgia since age 10, she has merged those two cultures along her path to becoming a professional storyteller.

Before long she is voicing a frightened child, a wise dolphin, a nervous monkey, a comical monster, a trio of goats, an unrepentant turtle, an angry king, a lovelorn princess, a gentle mother, and a host of other characters, often speaking for several in rapid succession. The delivery becomes a marvelous frenzy. Her malleable voice goes high, low, quivery, gruff, desperate, sweet, ear-whisper

With her bilingual assortment of voices and a basketful of handheld musical instruments, Tersi commands the rapt attention of Norton Park Elementary students in Smyrna.



PHOTOGRAPHS: ROBERT M. PEACOCK

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Tersi Bendiburg

"Stories nourished my fragile roots, allowing them to grow deep and strong in the red Georgia clay."

Tersi Bendiburg



close, and thoughtful-narrator distant in turn, sometimes so quickly you wonder how she keeps it all straight. Or how she catches her breath.

She frequently erupts into song, accompanying herself on castanets, maracas, tambourine, thumb piano, and other instruments she pulls from her basket. Tersi often pivots between Spanish and English, yet she translates each line so seamlessly that fascinated audiences familiar with only one language or the other follow the plot easily.

Half an hour later (or was it an hour? or two hours?), when Tersi

Whether they clap along with a sung story or gaze spellbound during a narrative tale, children long remember Tersi's visit to their school.

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finishes and bids a smiling goodbye, she never fails to leave a strong impression. Enchanted audiences including schoolchildren, museum and library patrons, senior citizens groups, church and festival gatherings, birthday and wedding parties, and others keep her calendar one of the busiest among members of the Georgia-based Southern Order of Storytellers.

"I was 10 when my family left Cuba and moved to Decatur," Tersi recalls. "Learning a new culture changed our lives forever. Change is often difficult, even painful. For me, stories made the process easier. Growing up I heard folktales, legends, and family stories from my parents and from the close-knit Cuban-American community in Decatur. I've come to understand how these stories nourished my fragile roots, allowing them to grow deep and strong in the red Georgia clay," she explains with a smile.

RUNS IN THE FAMILY

A veteran performer at many storytelling festivals, Tersi Bendiburg began learning her art as a child listening to older family members. But her first audience was little sister Carmen Agra Deedy, also an avid storyteller and children's author, who played the attentive younger sibling upon whom Tersi honed her craft. "As a child I thought of her as my own Scheherazade," says Carmen, whose commentaries sometimes air over National Public Radio. Whereas Tersi interprets traditional tales drawn from Latin American cultures, Carmen's subject matter is more of the coming-of-age and dealing-with-modern-life varieties, with occasional forays into the torn-between-two-cultures oddities of growing up Cuban in Decatur. The next generation to inherit the trait might well be Tersi's two sons, Ben and Jordan, who've grown up listening to their mother, aunt, and other relatives doing what they do best—talking.

Her transition from Cuba to Georgia whetted a broader appetite for collecting tales. While traveling extensively as an adult, Tersi has gathered traditional stories linked to such distant locales as Puerto Rico, Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Panama, South America, and places close to home, including Georgia. Myths passed down by the Carib and Taino peoples native to the Caribbean islands, as well as legends and parables brought to the New World by enslaved Africans and exploration-bent Europeans, now stock her rich repertoire.

"The oral tradition is an ancient art form," Tersi says. "The stories carry wisdom, humor, tears, and the experiences of many generations. A story is a living thing that should be treated with respect."

So long as Tersi keeps telling, these stories will continue to earn a respect as comforting as her unfailing appreciation for them.

JOE RADA

For information on how to book Tersi Bendiburg as a storyteller, contact Young Audiences of Atlanta, (404) 589-0644.



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