How Turtle Cracked His Shell
from the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe

A long time ago, when the animals could still talk, there was a famine in the land. The famine was so bad that there was absolutely no food to eat in the animal kingdom. Many of the animals were suffering and dying one by one. The Tortoise would not go down without a fight. He was the most cunning of all the animals and was determined to find some food for himself and his family.

One day, the Tortoise observed that the birds in the kingdom were not starving like everyone else. They looked fresh and their feathers were not drying up. He made it his business to find out what their secret was.

Being as cunning and clever as ever, he went to the birds to ask them what their secret was. Of course, they were reluctant to tell him! After assuring them that he could help them to get even more food if they told him their secret, the birds conceded. They explained to him that the people of the Sky were responsible for the meat on their bones. The Tortoise promised to help them get even more food, and with his cunning mind, he developed a plan. He told the birds that if they helped him get to the Sky, he would be their spokesperson. All the birds, and indeed all the animals of the kingdom, knew that Tortoise was an amazing orator; so, they agreed. After discussion, they had hatched a plan. Each bird would contribute a few feathers to Tortoise until he had enough feathers to make wings that would allow him to fly.

On the day that the birds and Tortoise agreed to go to the Sky, Tortoise put on his plumage and was finally able to fly. When they all got to the Sky, they were given a grand welcome. As their spokesperson, Tortoise introduced himself and spoke on behalf of the birds. Since he had the most unique and colorful plumage, the Sky people immediately thought that Tortoise was their chief. When they served the food to their guests, they served Tortoise first, as a result. The birds were not pleased with that.

However, Tortoise had another trick up his sleeves. He told the birds that at grand occasions such as these, each animal would take up an alternative name. After the birds
each chose a name, Tortoise chose the name “All of you” as his name. When the hosts
brought more food for their guests, Tortoise made a point of asking who the food was
for. “Well, the food is for all of you,” the hosts said. With a smirk, Tortoise turned to the
birds and stated that since the food was for “All of you” and his chosen name was “All of
you,” the food was for him alone. The poor birds watched angrily as the Tortoise ate
everything!

When it was time to go, the birds were so angry that they each took their feathers from
Tortoise. He was now unable to fly back home. Sensing danger, Tortoise begged the
birds to send a message to his wife to bring out all the soft things from his house so that
when he jumped from the Sky, he would be okay. All but one of them refused. The
eagle, the angriest of all the birds, agreed to give the message to Tortoise’s wife.

The eagle flew back to Tortoise’s house and told his wife that Tortoise requested that
she bring out all the hard things from the house. Of course, she began to do just that.
She brought out the mortar, the plates, the wooden tables...all the hard things you can
think of. With his limited vision, Tortoise couldn’t see what was being brought out so he
assumed that the eagle had given the right message to his wife.

When Tortoise jumped from the Sky, he got the surprise of his life. He landed on the
hardest and sharpest objects and his shell broke into many pieces. With the help of his
wife, he was able to pick them up and glue them back together. Unfortunately, his
previously smooth shell was never smooth again. The process of putting the pieces
together was less than perfect and his shell became rough.

This is why the tortoise has a cracked shell.

Message:
Once upon a time, a long time ago, there lived a spider named Anansi. Anansi's wife was a very good cook. But always, Anansi loved to taste the food that others in the village made for themselves and for their families.

One day, he stopped by Rabbit's house. Rabbit was his good friend.

"There are greens in your pot," cried Anansi excitedly. Anansi loved greens.

"They are not quite done," said Rabbit. "But they will be soon. Stay and eat with me."

"I would love to, Rabbit, but I have some things to do," Anansi said hurriedly. If he waited at Rabbit's house, Rabbit would certainly give him jobs to do. "I know," said Anansi. "I'll spin a web. I'll tie one end around my leg and one end to your pot. When the greens are done, tug on the web, and I'll come running!"

Rabbit thought that was a great idea. And so it was done.

"I smell beans," Anansi sniffed excitedly as he ambled along. "Delicious beans, cooking in a pot."

"Come eat our beans with us," cried the monkeys. "They are almost done."

"I would love to Father Monkey," said Anansi. And again, Anansi suggested he spin a web, with one end tied around his leg, and one end tied to the big bean pot.

Father Monkey thought that was a great idea. All his children thought so, too. And so it was done.

"I smell sweet potatoes," Anansi sniffed happily as he ambled along. "Sweet potatoes and honey, I do believe!"

"Anansi," called his friend Hog. "My pot is full of sweet potatoes and honey! Come share my food with me."
"I would love to," said Anansi. And again, Anansi suggested he spin a web, with one end tied around his leg, and one end tied to the sweet potato pot.

His friend Hog thought that was a great idea. And so it was done.

By the time Anansi arrived at the river, he had one web tied to each of his eight legs.

"This was a wonderful idea," Anansi told himself proudly. "I wonder whose pot will be ready first?"

Just then, Anansi felt a tug at his leg. "Ah," said Anansi. "That is the web string tied to Rabbit's greens." He felt another. And another. Anansi was pulled three ways at once.

"Oh dear," said Anansi as he felt the fourth web string pull.

Just then, he felt the fifth web string tug. And the sixth. And the seventh. And the eighth. Anansi was pulled this way and that way, as everyone pulled on the web strings at once. His legs were pulled thinner and thinner. Anansi rolled quickly into the river.

When all the webs had washed away, Anansi pulled himself painfully up on shore.

"Oh my, oh my," sighed Anansi. "Perhaps that was not such a good idea after all."

To this day, Anansi the Spider has eight very thin legs. And he never got any food that day at all.

Message:
Guiding Questions

What moral(s) is shared by all 3 stories?

How is this message portrayed differently in each? Why?

What other stories have you heard that share this message?

Besides the moral message, what do these stories tell us about the people who created and sustained them?

How can historians use fiction and folklore to learn about a particular culture, its’ people, or its’ impact on the greater world?