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Maintaining Dane-zaa Identity: “Those Story I Remember, That’s What I Live by Now”

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INTRODUCTION¹

In July of 1999, Billy Attachie and two other Dane-zaa² elders drove me through some of the traditional lands used by the Doig River First Nation. The Doig River community is one of the Dane-zaa First Nations of the north Peace River area of British Columbia. The Dane-zaa are Athapaskan-speaking hunters of the subarctic. For each place we visited, Billy told a story. Stories continue to be central to Dane-zaa identity, as Billy acknowledged when he said, “those story I remember, that’s what I live by now.”

His statement was strikingly similar to one Southern Tutchone elder Angela Sidney made to Julie Cruikshank; Sidney said that she tried to live her life “just like a story” (Cruikshank 1990). The convergence is not surprising or accidental. Both narrators are Athapaskans; both are from a hunting tradition in which stories are integral to technology; both felt comfortable explaining their traditions to anthropologists who value being good listeners.

As we proceeded through the territory, Billy recalled the stories by which his people remember each place. He talked about how important stories had been when he was growing up in the 1940s and ’50s. At that time, his people traveled on their seasonal rounds using saddle horses, pack horses and dog teams. In the mid-1950s, with the advent of oil exploration and seismic roads, they began to use wagons drawn by team horses. By the early 1970s, these were replaced by pickup trucks. Now, the Dane-zaa are fully engaged with the institutions and technologies of contemporary society. Still, stories continue to be important to their identity as First Nations people. Stories continue to serve as guides. The Dane-zaa are now consciously and deliberately using information about their cultural heritage as a means of adapting to contemporary conditions.

I began doing fieldwork with Dane-zaa communities of the Peace River area in 1964. The elders I knew then had lived their lives in the bush as hunters and trappers. At the Doig River reserve, old sod-roofed log cabins still stood in a field above the plywood houses issued by the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs. Although the Alaska highway had opened their territory to settlement after 1942, most Dane-zaa still lived by hunting and trapping, and used horses as a primary means of transport. Members of the community were immensely knowledgeable about the game resources of their territory. They still organized their lives according to kinship relations. I did extensive interviews about kinship and put

together genealogical charts that revealed a complex web of interrelationships between families. The genealogies reached well back into the nineteenth century. I included these charts as an appendix to my thesis (Ridington 1968).

A key point of my thesis, and of my later publications, has been that the Dane-zaa are adept at negotiating relations with both human and non-human persons. I observed how empowering vision quest experiences led people to develop intense personal relationships with "animal friends," whose powers and attributes were already public knowledge through the stories elders told about them. Although I did not write about contemporary challenges in my thesis, it was clear to me that the same Dane-zaa who were so competent in the bush were not equipped with the linguistic and cultural tools required for dealing with the institutions of a distant bureaucracy. In the years since my first fieldwork, I have been privileged to witness the Dane-zaa move from a purely hunting and trapping economy to one that is now integrated, in a dense and complex way, into the fabric of contemporary political and economic issues. Tommy Attachie described these changes as going, "from pack horse to truck."

Jillian Ridington joined me in the 1970s. Over the course of our work we have accumulated an archive consisting of thousands of photographs and hundreds of hours of audio tape (and, more recently, digital mini-disc recordings). We are now working with the Dane-zaa First Nations to make this archive available to them electronically, as well as in creating a genealogical data base for members of the former Fort St. John band. This paper discusses the role of stories in Dane-zaa life and describes how the Dane-zaa are using material in the archive to help them remember old stories and generate new ones.

WISE STORIES

In Dane-zaa oral tradition it is important to be both a good narrator and a good listener. Billy, his brother Tommy and Sam Acko have been particularly interested in adding to the archive of recorded stories. During the summers of 1999 and 2000, they did this by driving me through the territories while I recorded stories that came to mind for each place. As we drove through these places where Dane-zaa hunters camped during their seasonal rounds, Billy spoke of how stories have been an important means of preserving and passing on cultural identity. During our drives through the territory, I took generally the role of listener or, as Jillian and I sometimes joked, a "bionic mikestand." By recording on minidisc, I was able to document continuous and uninterrupted audio actualities of up to two hours and twenty-eight minutes of digital sound in mono mode. I used a good quality Sony microphone to "close mike" the person talking. The minidisc format allows for inaudible track marks to be inserted during or after a recording. I placed marks at about two minute intervals throughout the recording session, or when I heard something that was particularly important. Immediately upon returning from a recording session, I listened to samples from each track and wrote up a recording log of names, places, key words and other relevant information. When it came time to select passages for transcription, I was able to look through the log and return to precise locations in the recording. Using the log, I was able to locate passages in which the narrators talked about the process of narration and the importance of stories in Dane-zaa life.

Even though these recordings contain a certain amount of ambient sound from the moving vehicle, the voice recordings are clear. While an outside observer may have some difficulty understanding the “Indian English” spoken by Dane-zaa of Billy’s generation, I was able to transcribe his words with almost complete certainty. Rather than rendering the text in paragraph form, I have chosen to use an ethnopoetic line-for-line style of presentation that does justice to the oral cadence of the narrator’s spoken words, and reflects my own role of listener.

Billy, who was born in 1940, told me that being an elder involves more than simply growing old. He was able to become one by learning to listen to stories when he was young. Stories, he said, give people directions. Some stories, he said, are particularly instructive. These he called “wise stories.” Here is the context in which he made this observation:

Some story just for to go.
 If you out to bush
 you go by the story, you know.
 It’s tell you to watch for weather.
 You get caught in the north wind.
 Those days, chinook day.
 Really nice chinook day,
 all day, and then the next day,
 just turn, next hour, turn cold.
 It’s just like that all the time.
 If it’s happen,
 your clothes wet, you know,
 you got to find a way to make a fire
 to dry yourself.
 What kind of stick, you have to look for it,
 where you going to, where you going to spend the night.
 Wise story, they call it.
 Some of them are make really sense.
 If it wasn’t those story,
 people will maybe get hurt.
 Maybe they won’t come back.
 They might get lost.

In the mid 1960s, I recorded stories on audio tape from a number of elders. Billy’s grandmother, Mary Pouce-Coupe, was one of them. Her Dane-zaa name is Nachin, which means “big.” Earlier in the day I drove with Billy, I had played one of these tapes for him and some younger people who had not known her. Billy recalled how important Nachin’s stories had been to him as he was growing up:

Today, this morning, remember, I listen to my grandma’s story.
 I remember those story all the time.

Sometime, I think about it.
 Those, when you are young they tell you a story.
 How to communicate with people,
 how to treat another people just like your own,
 and don't try make people you enemy or,
 if something go wrong between you and other guy,
 just let it go.
 You know, and then when it's come around again, it's better.
 Better than good.
 So, those story I remember.
 That's what I live by now.
 That time, just like I don't listen.
 Grandma says, today [on the tape],
 "You got no ears. You don't listen."
 But I guess that time I pick up little bit,
 at the time, all the time,
 and then now I, now I know it solidly.
 (Ridington 1999a: DZ99-17 07-28-99, trk 27)

Billy's grandmother was an important influence in his life. Hearing the story I had recorded in 1966 took him back. She talked about a time when she was a girl and saved her people from starvation by discovering a chewed stick that a hibernating bear had left by its den. After talking about Nachin's story, Billy gave his own version of it. In doing this he demonstrated how stories can pass down from one generation to another, through oral tradition.

She says, she was looking for porcupine.
 Went up on top of that big hill.
 Getting dark.
 I guess she wanted to cut straight across.
 Short cut.
 She saw a broken stick.
 You know, been chewing.
 She put it in her packsack.
 She look around.
 She see where scratch mark, eh.
 So she went back.
 People got nothing to eat.
 That time, they always starving.
 Always.
 Grandma says,
 one person if they don't eat ten days,
 that's nothing.

Before her time,
they live without food more than ten days.
I guess she got back and she don't remember.
She, pretty soon, just about middle the night,
oh yeah, she remember.
She call her aunt.
Her aunt come over.
"I found this."
She took it out of her packsack,
give it to her aunt.
Her aunt, before she come back to her old man,
"Our daughter find a bear, bear den."
Then, before the old man see that stick,
he holler at the people.
"It's a long night, you know.
We can get him tonight."
So grandma thought,
"What they talking about?
I never found bear."
And then, I guess,
they all come to this old man's place at night.
They took two hunting dog.
They went back to that place.
I guess grandma told them where it is.
Before they got near,
those dog took off right up there.
They find the place where the bear.
They tie em up, I guess, those dog,
after they find that bear den.
So they put two stick across like this,
right in front of the hole.
And usually they say, right where on top of the bear,
where they sleep,
it's very thin, I guess.
Every bear hole's like that,
on top of them where they sleep,
the ground is not too thick.
So I guess took the snow out
and they poke right on top of the bear.
They make fire, too.
They poke em,
and then one bear come out,
stuck his head out across those two,

two green trees like this.
 So, he can't jump over it,
 he can't go under it.
 He just stuck his head out.
 They shot him.
 They pull him away.
 Another one.
 I think three, I think.
 And they skin them all,
 and then, by the time they all got back,
 everybody eat, before, before morning.
 You know that little stick she found.
 That's tell the whole story.
 She says when they holler
 that I found the bear, bear hole, bear den.
 She says,
 "I got scared. Why they say that?"
 His aunt, before she come back,
 you know, they live in a tipi, eh.
 "Our daughter find a bear."
 And then the old man,
 before he see the stick,
 holler too, eh.
 Holler at everybody.
 "It's a long night.
 You guys come.
 Go after that bear."
 (Ridington 1999a: DZ99-14 Trk 34—Recorded July 27, 1999)

NARRATIVE TECHNOLOGY

As Billy pointed out, Dane-zaa Stories quite literally help people negotiate relations with their environment:

If it wasn't those story,
 people will maybe get hurt.
 Maybe they won't come back.

Stories and experiences stand for one another. Nachin found a chewed stick and gave it to her aunt. The little stick was full of meaning to the elders. It expanded the girl's experience into a story that brought life to the people. Like every other story, it was a part that stands for the whole.

That little stick she found
that's tell the whole story.

Billy's stories and those of other Dane-zaa exemplify what I have called "narrative technology" (Ridington 1999b). Aboriginal people of the North American Subarctic have evolved adaptive strategies that place great emphasis on the authority of individual intelligence, yet acknowledge the social responsibility required of a system in which animals and humans alike are interdependent members of a single community. They recognize that success in hunting and other activities depends more on the possession of knowledge, and on reciprocities with other persons, than on the possession of particular material goods. They rely on narrative knowledge that is in the possession of individuals, rather than on knowledge that is mediated through supra-individual institutions. Unlike more sedentary people who can accumulate wealth in the form of material possessions, subarctic people recognize knowledge as a form of wealth. Physical objects may be lost, but knowledge stays with a person throughout his or her life. Knowledge can be communicated and shared through narrative. Drawing upon narrated knowledge, a person can use environmental resources to make material objects as they are needed at a particular site.

The "wise stories" that Billy referred to are part of Dane-zaa narrative technology. Northern hunters like the Dane-zaa have traditionally found it far more useful to carry plans and information in their minds, rather than to be burdened with carrying material artifacts. Billy went on to tell how he learned to hunt, "just by the story."

I remember where we were practice tracking moose,
me and Tommy Dominic,
just by the story, by wind. We track with.
The moose come from the west, the west wind.
Just follow the wind.
He turn.
Turn to north.

So he's, we talk to each other. He says,
"My dad said if the moose go that way,
the wind coming from the west,
he's going to make a round,
a round trip like that.
He must be straight down.
Right straight down west.
That's where he's ... that moose laying there,"
we told each other.
So we walk back a little ways.
We went south.
We went south
where the moose turn,

north, we circle way down.
 We just about came back over there.
 There's no track.
 We see our track and we went back little ways,
 back and forth like this.
 Moose laying there.
 Just by the story we found this moose.
 But we didn't kill him.
 Practice.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES FOR THE DANE-ZAA³

In 1900 the Dunne-za signed Treaty Eight with the government of Canada. In 1914 the Fort St. John band obtained reserve land as treaty land entitlement. The land they took was a summer gathering place known as *tsuu nedgi gedgi*, "the place where happiness dwells." The dreamer, Charlie Yahey, dreamed a song about how coming together in that place was like meeting your relatives in heaven. In 1945 the government of Canada engineered a land surrender that transferred ownership of this land from the Department of Indian Affairs to the Department of Veterans Affairs. Until the 1970s, band members did not understand how they had come to lose their former reserve. When they began to research events leading up to the surrender, they discovered evidence of a breach of trust by the crown. In 1987 they commenced a court action against the federal government for their loss of their land and its resources.

After a defeat at the federal trial court, they appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada. Although they did not win on all of their arguments, the Supreme Court agreed that a breach of trust existed in that the federal government had failed to recognize their continued ownership of mineral rights on the former reserve land. On the strength of that judgment, leaders of the former Fort St. John band negotiated a settlement of \$147,000,000 Canadian dollars (about \$100,000,000 US).

In 1977 the Fort St. John Band was divided into the Doig River and Blueberry River bands. Today, approximately 500 members of these two bands are registered on official "band lists." Because of the large amount of money involved, many persons claiming descent from former members, or from relatives of former members, of the Fort St. John band are now suing for a share of the money. The genealogy and related narratives which Robin and I, together with other researchers hired by the Blueberry band are now preparing, will provide information about whether or not these claims are valid. It will be interesting, and perhaps precedent setting, when the validity of this ethnographic record is judged in court.

Genealogical information is also relevant to the question of treaty land entitlement. Treaty land was allocated in 1914 on the basis of 128 acres per person, as determined by government records. Careful genealogical research can help determine the accuracy of those records, and may indicate whether or not the crown has fulfilled its land entitlement obligations. The research Robin conducted in the 1960s is particularly important to current

legal issues, as it was conducted entirely for academic purposes, with no anticipation of its later significance to legal proceedings. At that time he had no expectation that the information would ever be used for anything other than historical documentation. Yet, in the current context, it has become the basis of the genealogy we are entering into a computer program. We took this information, supplemented it with Robin's early field notes and reel-to-reel tapes, and integrated it with old band lists and the taped interviews we have done over the past three decades. From these sources, we created a data base that we then took back to the band for comment and confirmation.

We also began comparing our information with the data that researchers from the Arctic Institute, who had been hired by the Blueberry band, had acquired. Although they also did interviews throughout the summer of 1999, most of their data came from the baptismal records of the Catholic missions that worked diligently in the Peace River area for about one hundred years, from the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th Century. The Arctic Institute researchers also relied heavily on records accumulated by the Department of Indian Affairs after the Dane-zaa signed Treaty Eight in 1900. We used this information to supplement and corroborate our data.

In contrast to government records, the interviews that Robin did with Dane-zaa elders in the 1960s presented an oral history that goes back at least to the 1820s, and probably goes back to first contact. People who were born in the 1890s, or in the early years of the 20th century, told Robin stories that had been told to them by their grandparents; those grandparents had firsthand knowledge that went back to the advent of fur trading in the Peace River area. They knew about the Dane-zaa's first contact with white people in the 1790s, and beyond, to pre-contact events such as "atuklintasuhlutz," the "dog piss on arrow war." Many of the names Robin heard also appear in the journals of fur traders for the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company—the two major rivals across Canada during the heyday of the fur trade. The names and relationships he collected in the 1960s correspond closely to information still in the Dane-zaa oral tradition. People living today still remember stories about people who lived well over a century ago. They remember names and singular experiences. They particularly remember the names of Dreamers who brought down songs from *yagatunne*, the trail to heaven. Songs from heaven remind people of stories about the dreamers.

What is amazing—although perhaps it should not be—is the degree of congruence between the oral tradition and the written record. The stories Robin recorded in the mid-1960s, and those we have heard over the last quarter-century, mirror records in the archives of the Catholic Church and the DIA. Where they differ, the differences seem to arise from such factors as the Church's reluctance to record the multiple marriages that were common among successful Dunne-za hunters, and its requirement that children being baptized be given the name of a saint. (We had no record of a Dane-zaa hunter named Aloysius, but he assumed his rightful place when we established that he was known as "Billy.") The baptismal record also lists many of the children who were born, and owing to the harsh climate, the lack of resistance to white-man's diseases—like the Spanish influenza of 1918, which decimated the population—never lived to procreate. Because they were not the ancestors of anyone living, they were lost from the oral history.

What is particularly interesting from a methodological perspective is the integrity of information collected entirely from an oral tradition, without reference to any written documentation beyond band lists from the 1960s. Robin's genealogies documented just what people told him. He transcribed names as he heard them. Some of the names were purely Dane-zaa, while others were Dane-zaa renditions of European names. For instance, one name which he recorded as "Mudis" turned out, upon recent inspection of annuity payments and baptismal records, to be the French name, "Modeste." Another name, "Klukenazit," was a puzzle. However, after consultation with Billy and other elders, we were able to identify her with a person mentioned in the DIA record as "Prairie Standard." These Dane-zaa told us that the name Klukenazit means, "standing on the prairie." Some DIA employee had transcribed that as "Prairie Standard." Thus, we were able to connect the Dane-zaa name with one in the government record, and through that, verify a number of additional names and relationships.

Dane-zaa oral narrative continues to use kin terms to describe social and biological relationships. People speak of their relatives both by egocentric kin terms and by sociocentric identification with named bands. With the help of Dane-zaa elders, we have been successful in matching Robin's original genealogy with the often imperfect government and church records, but notions of band membership have been more difficult to reconcile. Following the signing of Treaty Eight in 1899, male heads of families were assigned "ticket numbers" as members of particular bands. These were generally named for the nearest trading post and did not necessarily correspond to Dane-zaa categories. Women and children were counted as belonging to a man's ticket, but were not named unless they were widowed or became the head of a single-parent family. Thus, band membership has become a matter of law as well as of kinship. Under Canadian law, no Indian can be a member of more than one band at a time. While the DIA records list transfers on marriage, adoptions out, and the like, our oral record reflects Dane-zaa categories rather than these legal ones. None of the DIA records identify band names used by the Dane-zaa. They reflect bureaucratic convenience, not Dane-zaa reality. Even today, discourse in the Dane-zaa language uses indigenous names for social groupings, rather than those of the DIA bureaucracy.

STORIES OF THE DREAMERS⁴

Dane-zaa narrators remember genealogy in the context of stories about people's lives. Dramatic events from the past continue to be part of the oral tradition. In 1965, for instance, Johnny Chipesia told Robin a story about a man named Tsekute, who people said had become a cannibal at Moberly Lake. He lived by luring hungry people to his camp with the trail markers hunters use to indicate they have meat in their camp. Maketchueson, the dreamer, tried to kill him, but Tsekute had too much power and Maketchueson could only shoot through the cannibal's bark hat. Still, Tsekute was afraid of the dreamer; he offered to give him his two daughters if Maketchueson wouldn't kill him. After thinking about heaven and the teachings of the dreamer, Makenunatane, Maketchueson took the daughters and spared Tsekute. Tsekute's other children were the ancestors of families that exist today. One of the daughters who married Maketchueson had a "boyfriend" whose name, as we

learned this summer from Tommy Attachie, was Wus'sage. Tommy told us a story about how Wus'sage tried to kill Maketchueson. It is essentially the same story Robin heard from Johnny Chipesia in 1965, but in 2000, we were able to record and transcribe Tommy's exact words. This is what he said about the event:

Wus'sage. Must be, I think that's Wus'sage,
 Cryingman granddad. That's what grandma said.
 Cryingman, from Moberly, I think. Cryingman.
 He's Cryingman's old grandfather.
 That's the one, tried to kill Maketchueson.
 And instead, he got his wife.
 Cryingman, Wus'sage. That's what grandma said.
 Old Aku told me that, too.
 And after Maketchueson, he want to,
 he look for him all over and he's going to kill him,
 but he run away back.
 Then after that he was mad you know.
 He went to sleep. He see a lake of fire.
 God told him,
 "He used to go together.
 Him and your wife go together.
 He going to kill you and then after,
 you take him back over there," he said.
 "And why you want to kill that guy?"
 He show them the fire, too.
 So from there, he just quit.
 That's what they said.
 From there, he's dream.
 He's get lots of songs, too.
 That's how he become a prophet.
 Maketchueson.

(Ridington 1999: DZ99-27 Trk 2—Recorded September 18, 2000)

Tommy's story integrates kinship information with a narrative about the dreamer's tradition. It illustrates a key element of the dreamers' teaching, which is that people should abandon revenge killing, and think instead about their relatives in heaven. Maketchueson's name means, "he shows the way." His songs are among those that still form the basis of the dreamer's dance repertoire. Each song in the tradition recalls the story of the dreamer who brought it back to earth along "yagatunne," the trail to heaven (Ridington 1988). The songs and stories keep alive the memory of dreamers who lived well over a century ago. Some of their names can be linked to historical records. The dreamer Aledze, whose name means "powder," is listed in Hudson's Bay post journals from the 1860s. The dreamer Makenunatane, whose teachings Maketchueson thought about during his encounter with

Tsekute, was one of the first dreamers. His dreamer's name means "trail over the top". Tommy told us about a dream encounter he had with with swans (dague). In the 1960s, Charlie Yahey and other elders of his generation told me that dreamers are like swans; they can "fly through to another country and return without dying." Dreamers, like swans, fly through to heaven and return with songs. Tommy told us the story about Makenunatane's encounter with swans as he learned it from Charlie Dominic:

Charlie Dominic told me
 that Makenunatane was dreaming about Dague, too.
 Them Dague was just in the lake, eh.
 From heaven, they going to make them do that.
 So they stay on the lake, you know,
 and pretty soon he look at the sky,
 and he start to shoot up, go up.
 When they going to get rest, you know,
 they going to go round and round and keep going.
 He keep going and Yagatunne right there.
 He can't make it.
 Even them animal, got no scent or nothing.
 Yagatunne, can't make it.
 And he start to pray.
 Makenunatane dream about him, look at him.
 And he go round and round in there.
 He can't go through.
 So he pray, them Dague he pray, eh.
 And that is open for them and he go through.
 Only two Dague went in heaven without died.
 Makenunatane dream about that, too.
 That's something.
 (Ridington 2000: DZ00-7 Trks 52-56—Recorded June 3, 2000)

The story about Makenunatane and his dream of swans resonates with a 1799 Northwest Company journal which referred to the Fort St. John Beaver chief as "the Cigne" (Burley et al. 1996). This "swan chief" may have been Makenunatane. Dane-zaa tradition credits him with foretelling the coming of the whitemen. His songs are still an important part of the dreamers' dance repertoire. One of Makenunatane's songs describes his encounter with daylight and reinforces his connection to swans, who are seen as being like the sun in their ability to circle the rim of heaven. Tommy Attachie translated what the dreamer, Charlie Yahey, said about Makenunatane's daylight song as follows:

Daylight coming.
 This earth is too far, too long.
 "I kind of slow," he [daylight] said.

“Wake up. I come to you,” he said.
 “But this earth is too big.
 I go slow,” he said.
 Even that daylight made that song.
 Makenunatane dream about that.
 “I’m kind of slow. Too much big earth,” he says.
 Even them things, you know, they, that’s alive.
 Everything is alive.
 And he told to Makenunatane, that daylight,
 “I’m kind of slow. You sing that song for me.
 I’m coming towards you,” he said.
 That daylight say that to him.
 Makenunatane.
 Daylight, he say that to him.
 You make the song, help me.
 He’s going to tell him that, he said.
 Daylight’s going to tell Makenunatane that.
 (Ridington 2000: DZ00–2 Trks 55–56—Recorded May 27, 2000)

CONCLUSION

The Dane-zaa continue to live by stories in the oral tradition, but they have also benefitted from sharing in the task of documenting their traditions over the years. Information about genealogical relationships now has legal and financial implications, as well as cultural significance. Stories have literary as well as historical value. In collaboration with documentary filmmaker Stacy Shaak, members of the Doig River First Nation are using material from the audio and visual archive to tell stories about themselves to a wider audience. As adaptable and pragmatic hunting and gathering people, they are quick to create stories using new technologies. While elders continue to be the source of contact between past and present generations, younger people are experimenting with new media to carry on their traditions. These media will help the younger generation remember stories about who they are. Young people continue to live by their stories, as Billy and Tommy and their grandmother and the dreamers did in the past.

NOTE

- 1) “Introduction” was written by Robin Ridington.
- 2) Billy Attachie is trained in linguistic transcription and prefers Dane-zaa to the spelling Dunne-za used in previous publications. This paper adheres to his preference.
- 3) “Contemporary Issues for the Dane-zaa” was written by Jillian Ridington.
- 4) “Stories of the Dreamers” was written by Robin and Jillian Ridington.

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