

The Daily Tar Heel

11/14/2018, 9:32PM

Tales of cowherds and forbidden romance at Storytelling Under the Stars



The Morehead Planetarium hosts a star gazing session open to the public once a month at Jordan Lake.

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The Morehead Planetarium is hosting its ninth annual Storytelling Under the Stars event beneath the sparkling dome on Nov. 18 at 4:30 p.m.

Two folktales from China, one traditional Paiute Native American story and a tale from New Zealand will be told by Professor Brian Sturm of UNC's School of Information and Library Science and his students. Following the stories, Amy Sayle, astronomy educator at the planetarium, will take the audience on a "fly-through the universe" virtually.

Sayle and Sturm created the Storytelling Under the Stars event when Sayle was a student in Sturm's storytelling course at UNC. Sturm, who used to run a planetarium in Rhode Island, and Sayle said they had a shared love for the environment and sharing stories.

"I absolutely love the environment of a planetarium," Sturm said. "It's a very special kind of place. I always thought telling stories under the stars would be a wonderful thing."

Sayle said she is eager to share the globally diverse stories that all connect back to the universal night sky.

"Everybody loves stories — I mean we're hard-wired for narratives," Sayle said. "I hope it helps people get a sense that the night sky is not just our natural heritage but it represents our cultural heritage as well. People all around the world have looked up at the night sky and told stories about what they saw there."

Sturm, who is a professional storyteller, agreed that people across the globe can find connection through a narrative. He said it is one of the best ways to share information.

"Storytelling in general livens things up," Sturm said. "We tend to think in stories rather than facts. Anytime you can frame something in a narrative or story form, then we accept it more readily, and we engage with it and enjoy it more deeply."

Last year the event sold out. The planetarium seats over 200 people, and Sturm expects a diverse audience.

"Just about anyone who loves stories or loves the experience of the planetarium (can come) — the stories appeal to all ages," Sturm said.

Sturm teaches a storytelling class, and one requirement of the class is that students present at least one story in front of a real audience. Sayle said the planetarium is a good environment for the students to tell their story publicly.

"It gives them exposure to a real audience," Sayle said. "It's one thing to tell a story to your mirror, or your cat, or your classmates, but it's another thing to be able to share a story with a live audience. Hopefully it will be a good experience for the tellers."

Libby Soucaze, a UNC junior, is enrolled in the fall section of Sturm's class and said she has enjoyed the way telling techniques and plot have changed since a story was first told.

"We really get to connect with each other and have discussions about different styles of storytelling and different stories and how stories have evolved through time," Soucaze said. "We get to play with different ways people tell stories."

Soucaze will be telling a story at the event of Chinese descent titled "The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl."

The story is a classic forbidden romance that takes place under the Milky Way and through the stars. Soucaze is minoring in Chinese and said the story was a good way to combine two of her interests.

"I thought this one would be an interesting story to tell because I could add a little bit of a twist and actually speak in Chinese during parts of the story," Soucaze said.

This folktale is a classic that Sturm said is slipping in popularity like other folk narratives. He has started an initiative called the Story Squad with students in the School of Information and Library Science to promote traditional storytelling.

"A lot of the professional storytellers who are out on the circuit now are telling personal narratives," Sturm said. "The storytellers who are still telling folktales are getting fewer and farther between. What I'm hopeful for is that this kind of storytelling, the telling of folktales from around the world, will continue to hold power and perhaps even gain traction."

Soucaze said she would encourage students to spend their Sunday evening with a less traditional activity and in a new setting.

"What better way to spend your Sunday evening than sitting under the stars — in central heating — with your friends and listening to some neat stories?" Soucaze said.

Tickets are three dollars plus tax, but for each ticket purchased after the second, one dollar will be taken off the price.

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