ORIGIN STORIES

INTRODUCTION

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By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsele
All humans yearn to know where we came from and how our world began. We may have different stories, but they all serve a similar purpose.
Everywhere around the world people tell stories about how the Universe began and how humans came into being. Anthropologists, who study humans—past and present—call these tales “creation myths” or “origin stories.” In comic books there is a special meaning for “origin stories.” They are the original story that tells what made superheroes who they are and how they got their superpowers.

Human origin stories tell where a particular culture came from. Some origin stories are based on real people and events. Others, however, are based on more imaginative accounts. Origin stories can contain powerful, emotional symbols. They can feature heroes and gods with great powers. They may tell deep truths, but not be stories based on fact.

In the United States, people tell stories about Santa Claus. But everyone, except young children, knows that he doesn’t actually exist. What he represents is a symbol of love and generosity. Many cultures tell stories that seem strange to outsiders. However, to members of a culture they may have a deep meaning. They help explain where that culture came from and how it fits into the Universe.

When people in a culture learn to read, they write down their origin stories. But the stories frequently go back way before written records. Before a group of people could write, they told stories to each other and handed them down verbally to others. This is called an “oral tradition.” Multiple versions of each story often exist, since people may change them slightly as they retell them. From group to group and generation to generation stories change. I have chosen to summarize four origin stories. They come from a wide number of places and eras. Feel free to tell them aloud to each other.

The fifth story I have written myself. It is a short version of Big History, told as a modern origin story. This one is based on scientific evidence and gathered by humans throughout planet Earth.
# Origin stories comparison chart

Use this chart to highlight the differences — and any similarities — between the origin stories you read:

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<th></th>
<th>Greek</th>
<th>Iroquois</th>
<th>Judeo-Christian</th>
<th>Mayan</th>
<th>Modern Scientific</th>
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<td>Source of the world</td>
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<td>Originator of the world</td>
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<td>How Earth formed</td>
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<td>Age of Earth</td>
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<td>First life forms</td>
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<td>How humans formed</td>
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<td>Relationship between humans &amp; animals/plants</td>
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</tbody>
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An illustration of the Iroquois prayer of Thanksgiving
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