Antonio Ayala

The most important details in this text are that Maria Johns, aged and blind, volunteered the tale of "The Girl Who Married the Bear" to explain why people do not eat the meat of grizzly bears and to account for the origin of the ritual for the proper disposal of the body of a slain bear. Maria's daughter, Dora Austin Wedge, translated her words into excellent English, and the only other person present was Dora's nine-year-old daughter, Annie. The narration was superb, and the story was something new to add to scholarly literature. In subsequent Yukon fieldwork, the Indians considered telling stories to be one of their most vital ways of expressing their identities and teaching their most deeply held values. Despite major changes in their culture, Native narrators and their audiences still find their oral traditions relevant in the literate world. Over the years many more stories filled my notebooks, and I heard about the girl who married the bear eleven more times.

The most important details in this text are the reasons why the story is so popular among Yukon Natives. Maria and Dora had already revealed the reason, which is that it is a marvelous piece of creative narrative. Maria was such a gifted raconteur and Dora such a fine translator that their skills had easily carried me across language differences, lifting the tale into a realm well beyond that encompassing all my earlier ideas of folklore. Despite knowing little of the tale's cultural context, I could not fail to sense the tremendous psychological and sociological conflicts in the plot. Ultimately, I came to understand that this particular story is a masterpiece of oral tradition, evoking in them the same kind of intense responses as those experienced by Greeks hearing their great Attic dramas. It speaks to those most aware of its cultural context, but its messages are

fundamental enough to have reached beyond the world of northern Natives to be recon-textualized in various ways by others of non-Indian heritage.