

Diane Wolkstein—A life in story

November 1942—January 2013

Zipang Mesopotamian storytellers past and present were saddened to learn of the death of our fellow storyteller Diane Wolkstein, whose work has been greatly influential in the field of Sumerian storytelling.

Diane had just arrived in Taiwan to continue her studies into the great Chinese Monkey King epic when she was taken ill. In spite of the best efforts of those caring for her, she died on 31st January. She was 71.

Committed to her art from an early age, she matured, over a storytelling career spanning more than half a century, into a scholar and storyteller skilled in communicating her great love and deep knowledge of stories from many cultures. For many of her listeners and readers, including the members of Zipang, it is for her work with the myth of Inanna that she will be most remembered.

In 1979 Diane began to work with the ancient story of the Sumerian goddess Inanna. Frustrated by finding only fragments of the story, she came to the Sumerologist Samuel Noah Kramer to learn more. Kramer surprised many of his colleagues, who expected him to find the bubbly young storyteller rather a trial, by offering a warm welcome to this unlikely mentee. The two began a fruitful collaboration, with Diane shaping Kramer's literal translations from the Sumerian into a coherent and poetic retelling of a story hardly known until their work brought it into public awareness.

Since then, many storytellers have been moved and inspired both by Diane's live performance work telling the story and by the extraordinary book *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth—her stories and hymns from Sumer*. This book is an important contribution to our understanding of the ancient people of Mesopotamia and a wonderful introduction to a passionate, intriguing, complicated and fully-rounded portrait of the goddess Inanna.

In May 2007, Diane performed Inanna at the British Museum and led a study day at The Theosophical Society. There were fascinating contributions by other experts on different aspects of Mesopotamian culture, including a presentation by Dr Cass Dalglish on Enheduanna's poetry. Diane also hosted an intimate discussion group for women only at a salon in Alexandra Palace. Zipang members Fran Hazelton and June Peters and their former colleague, Fiona Collins, attended all these events and were able to talk at length with Diane about her work, and share her insights into the oral literature of Mesopotamia. It was a wonderful time. Diane was exceptionally generous with her time, knowledge and friendship and gave many gifts, including signed copies of her books, to her fellow Mesopotamian storytellers.

She will be greatly missed, but her books and videos, as well as the intangible legacy left to storytelling by her performance work, will ensure that her unique contribution to our understanding of the myth of Inanna is not forgotten.