

STORYTELLING – WHAT IS IT, WHY DO IT, AND SOME WAYS TO SKIN THE CAT.

Duncan Williamson, the great upholder of Scottish Traveller traditions, maintains that storytelling is “the second oldest form of human entertainment”.

Storytelling must surely go back a long way. The account of the mammoth that got away, the explanation of the sun’s rising and the moon’s waning and waxing, must have been as gripping from the mouth of a skilled tale-spinner 20,000 years ago as are today’s urban legends - the *Phantom Hitchhiker*, *Granny on the Roof Rack* - or the re-telling of old Celtic myths.

When people talk about storytelling today, they generally mean “traditional” stories or “folk tales”; stories which, in one form or another, have probably been around a very long time, travelling from country to country and passing down from generation to generation by word of mouth, but also with the help of print and any other form of popular medium that’s been on the go. *Cinderella* is a good example, or *Tom Tit Tot* (better known as *Rumpelstiltskin*).

These stories are full of events. The characters in them tend to be archetypal - the handsome prince, the daft youngest son, the wicked stepmother - rather than psychologically delineated individuals, but do they have adventures! Good tends (though not always) to triumph over evil. Beauty signifies (though not always) goodness, ugliness maleficence. Violence comes swiftly, unexpectedly, cruelly. Traditional stories are often not very politically correct, but they do have a grip over the imagination. They are one of the great universal forms of popular entertainment.

That’s not the whole truth about storytelling though. Many stories are more than just entertainment. Some, for example, contain strong messages about human folly and how one should behave (*The Emperor’s New Clothes* is a good example, or *Bluebeard*, which issues a very strong warning about trusting fancy-looking strangers). The older generation of Scottish Travelling people say that, when they were young, their moral instruction was carried through the stories they were told.

Also, people are still making up stories to suit their times and circumstances, basing them, consciously or other wise, on the old models.

And the bar-room raconteur, or the teacher who holds a class spell-bound, is as much a storyteller as the professional who does the rounds of festivals, clubs, libraries and arts centres.

WHY TELL STORIES?

Some people just can't help telling stories (and they may do it well, or badly, or somewhere in between). Others aren't at all interested (it takes all kinds). And there are those, maybe the majority, who would like to be able to captivate an audience (even an audience of one) with a tale well told, but feel they lack the courage to launch into the narrative unknown. In truth, they may have been telling stories effectively all their lives – but, for the moment, let that rest. First, let's look at what stories and storytelling might have to offer.

STORYTELLING CAN BE GOOD FOR YOU.

It's one of the least expensive forms of popular entertainment (all you need is a storyteller and a willing audience – no lights, no P.A. system, no compere, no stadium. In fact, it thrives on intimacy).

Storytelling exercises and sharpens the memory.

It hones communication skills.

It can provoke an interest in local and national culture, and popular culture generally.

It can help the storyteller to earn a living.

It can provoke discussion and be morally instructive (see above).

It puts you in touch with archetypes (if you need to be put in touch with them).

It's great fun.

WHERE TO FIND STORIES.

Stories are all around you. Your life is a story. Our brains seem to have an inbuilt mechanism that constructs coherent narratives from the myriad stimuli that assail them every microsecond of the day. But, in those circumstances, who is the storyteller, and who the listener?

That kind of stuff apart, to repeat, **stories are all around you**. Here are some places you can find them:

Childhood Memories: many people had classic folk tales (often called “fairy tales”) told or read to them when they were young. *Beauty and the Beast*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Snow White*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Rapunzel*, as well as *Cinderella* and *Rumpelstiltskin* mentioned above, are all old and powerful stories which can grip a young audience today as much as they would have done two hundred years ago.

Bookshops: Religion and Mythology sections (for example in Waterstone’s) have folk tale collections. Children’s sections have them too, as well as often beautifully illustrated large paperback versions of single tales. These are good places to find anthologies of international tales. Secondhand and remaindered bookshops can be happy hunting grounds for story seekers, and those funny high street and shopping mall shops that specialise in cheap books often have copies of Joseph Jacobs’ classic *Celtic Fairy Tales* for a few pounds. There’s a list of some books to look out for on the last page of these sheets.

Libraries: local collections are particularly rich sources if you’re looking for legends and stories about the place where you live. They often contain rare books that are hard to find elsewhere. The reference library is a good place to look as well, and the children’s section. Old local newspapers often feature series about local tales and legends.

The Internet: go to **Google** or **Copernic** (free and easy to download, and comes up with excellent results), and type in *Scottish Folk Tales*, *Irish Myths*, *Wolf Legends*, or whatever your interest is and see what comes up. **Copernic** is particularly useful because it gives chunky text extracts which make it a lot easy to identify what you’re looking for.

Living Storytellers: in the USA, storytelling is big business. Over here it’s doing quite nicely, and there are festivals, clubs, library and arts centre events, environmental projects etc. which all feature storytelling in one way or another. Keep an eye out and go along to one or two. You can

learn a lot just by listening to a good storyteller, and you may pick up a story that you can re-tell (it's general practice to ask the storyteller if this is OK, but few would refuse). It would be unfair to single out individual storytellers as being exceptional, but there is a group of storytellers who have direct links to stories which have handed down by word of mouth. These are the Travelling people, and, in Scotland we have a number of representatives of Traveller culture who are fine storytellers (and often fine ballad singers too). Look out for these names – in no particular order: Duncan Williamson, Stanley Robertson, Sheila Stewart, Alec Williamson, Essie Stewart, Jimmy Williamson, Jess Smith, Elisabeth Stewart.

CDs and tapes: many storytellers have recordings for sale. Most are well-recorded and presented. They can be good for keeping the kids quiet in the car, as well as aids to techniques and to learning new tales.

SKINNING THAT CAT - WAYS TO REMEMBER AND TELL STORIES.

First, and very important, there is no “right” way to tell a story. Some storytellers jump up and down, wave their arms around and wear funny costumes. Others may become the still centre of attention, effacing their personalities in favour of letting their story speak for itself. If it works for you and for your audience, that's the bottom line. But how to get started? Well, first:

Find a story that grabs you. If you're starting off as a storyteller, there's not much point in choosing to tell a story that doesn't mean a lot to you. Pick a childhood favourite, or one you heard or read recently that you can't get out of your mind.

Look at the pictures. Rather than trying to learn the text of a story (for example, from a book), try and see it in your head as a film. Make sure you have a clear picture of the key events and know in what sequence they occur. Then you can tell the story by describing what you see.

Use your own words. Again, don't try and tell a story using words from a book or by copying a recording. If you can see the story in your head it will help a lot in telling it in your own way. If you can't, try another story.

Rehearse. Go through your chosen story silently when you're walking down the street, mutter it to yourself in the bath, say it out loud in the car or on a country walk. If you miss a bit out, go back and put it in. Play around with ways of describing those pictures in your head until your choice of words satisfies you.

Keep it simple. Some storytellers' stories get longer each time they tell them. They thrive on elaborating, and their audiences can enjoy being taken along for the ride. If it works for you, fine. Otherwise, when you're rehearsing your story, try and be as succinct as possible. Don't, for example, describe objects, events, characters' physical appearance in great detail. Leave space for the listeners to paint their own mental pictures. And, speaking of listeners, eventually you're going to have to:

Find an audience. You may have one ready-made: children at home, or a class at school. An opportunity may present itself in the community: a talent night to raise funds; the possibility of leading a walk incorporating a couple of local legends. Or you could ask a friend to be your audience, maybe someone who is themselves interested in storytelling, and who could try their stuff out on you in return. Whatever you decide to try, it's only in front of an audience that you begin to find out how things work. At this point you can begin to look at ways in which you can:

Personalise your storytelling. Although at first it's good to try telling lots of different kinds of stories, you might find you have a particular affinity for tales about trees, for example, or animals. You could begin actively seeking them out, build up a repertoire, and specialise in them. Or you might play a musical instrument, or sing. Then start to look for ways to incorporate your talent into stories. Some stories - which are sometimes called *cante-fables* - have little songs built in to them. Others could easily have songs integrated, for instance where a mother sings a baby to sleep. Other stories are built around musical instruments. If the instrument in the story is a fiddle and you play the trombone - change the story accordingly. Finally, it might be useful to:

Keep a story book. Lots of professional storytellers do this. Get a little book and write down just enough of the plot of a story you've heard or read, to remind you of the stories you know and the ones you would like to tell in the future. It's amazing how a story can slip from your mind.

SOME IDEAS FOR TEACHERS.

With younger children try to use lots of joining in, bring in repeated chants, songs, dancing, musical instruments, puppets and whatever else you feel at ease with to keep them engaged. Ask questions too. “And what do you think the fox did then?”

Look at the messages contained in well-known stories, and discuss their validity.

Get the children to compile a collection of local ghost stories, or to ask their older relatives for stories of when *they* were children. Make a book, a play, a website, a song cycle.

Tell the children a story and ask them to repeat it back to you. Between them they will probably have the whole thing in their heads after one listening, and it's the kind of process to which everyone can make a contribution. Get them to think about ways they would present the story for an audience. Write songs, make costumes and puppets, paint scenery, devise dances, integrate instrumental music pieces they already know, use narrators or write a script; combining your particular talents and theirs, the possibilities are endless. Then invite families and friends along to a performance.

When the performance is over, turn your story presentation into a radio script, record it on a minidisc, edit it on the school PC using free downloadable software, make CDs and sell them to parents and grandparents.

These are just a few projects that have worked for me. You will be able to employ your own strengths to find ways of using stories to explore different aspects of the curriculum, and different ways of looking at the world.

BOOKS.

Here are some of the books I have found useful or which I reckon are pretty essential reading. It's by no means a comprehensive list and, once you start searching, you'll soon find your own treasures. Some of them are out of print, so you may need to order them from a library. Others exist in a number of different editions, and some I haven't been able to find to hand on the shelves, so am not sure of the publishers.

A.J. Bruford and D.A. MacDonald, **Scottish Traditional Tales** (Polygon 1994). Classic collection with all the stories taken from oral sources.

Alan Bruford (Ed), **The Green Man of Knowledge** (Aberdeen University Press 1982). Scottish traditional tales from oral sources.

Jan Harold Brunvand, **Too good to be True: the Colossal Book of Urban Legends** (W.W. Norton and Company 1999). Terrific collection by the world's leading authority on urban legends. Check out that "true" story that happened to a friend of a friend.

J.F. Campbell, **Popular Tales of the West Highlands** (various editions, still available in Birlinn paperback, I think, but should be in most bigger libraries). The classic Victorian collection, bi-lingual with Gaelic on the left hand page and an English translation opposite, and in several volumes. Indispensable, fascinating commentary by Campbell and a window into a world, not so long ago, where storytelling was a part of people's lives.

Sheila Douglas (collected and introduced by), **The King o the Black Art** (Aberdeen University Press 1987). Scottish Traveller tales.

Frank Delaney, **Legends of the Celts** (Harper Collins 1994). Solid retellings in good contemporary prose.

Alan Garner, **A Bag of Moonshine** (Can't remember publisher, but available to order in paperback). Idiosyncratic retellings of English and Welsh stories that really work, both on the page and when read aloud. Great illustrations too.

Joseph Jacobs, **Celtic Fairy Tales** and **More Celtic Fairy Tales** (various editions). Originally published in the late 19th Century, these classic popular collections often come bundled together in one big, cheap reprint. They are racily told, with some great illustrations, and are first-rate source material.

Tom Muir, **The Mermaid Bride** (The Orcadian Limited 1998). Crisp retellings of Orkney folk tales with delightful illustrations.

Timothy Neat, **The Summer Walkers** (Canongate 1996). Fascinating autobiographies of Scottish Travellers, many of whom are also storytellers. Terrific archive photographs, and some stories as well. Another essential book.

Neil Philip, **The Illustrated Book of Myths** (Dorling Kindersley 1995). Well told summaries of myths from around the world, vividly and lavishly illustrated, as you would expect from DK.

Neil Philip (Ed), **The Penguin Book of English Folktales** (Penguin 1992). A rich collection, with some of the tales in versions never published before.

Neil Philip (Ed), **The Penguin Book of Scottish Folktales** (Penguin 1995). A splendid collection taken from wide-ranging sources, and costing less than a tenner.

Donald Smith, **Storytelling Scotland** (Polygon 2001). The only overview of Scottish storytelling. Informative and thought-provoking.

Sue Stewart (Ed), **A World of Folk Tales** (Scottish Cultural Press 1996). Stories from foreign places, told by people who live in Scotland.

David Thomson, **The People of the Sea** (various editions, but currently available in paperback). One of the great Romantic books of the 20th Century, a semi-fictional, semi-autobiographical account of Thomson's quest for selkie stories in the Western Isles, Ireland and Shetland.

Duncan Williamson, **The Thorn in the King's Foot** (Penguin 1987, currently out of print). Classic stories from the great Traveller storyteller. Duncan has had many books published by Canongate. They're out of print just now, but quite easy to get hold of, and I believe an anthology is planned.

Various, **Telling Stories** (The Scottish Storytelling Centre). Useful spiral-bound resource pack, heavily weighted towards Gaelic, but with idiomatic translations and lots of other useful information.

An essential 2-CD set of **recordings of traditional storytellers** (many of them Travellers) from the archives of the School of Scottish Studies is **Scottish Traditional Tales** (Greentrax: CDTRAX 9017D).

For information about storytelling in Scotland, the **Scottish Storytelling Centre** has to be the first port of call. Go their website at www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk – or write to them at The Netherbow, 43-45 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1SR, and they will send you an information pack.

STORYTELLING and STORYMAKING

Storytelling is a basic part of human existence. Our lives are stories. One of the mind's functions is to take the chaotic stimuli the universe chucks at us, and turn them, by selection and re-arrangement, into a narrative. (Please feel at liberty to disagree with this, or any other of my opinions).

Stories told can fulfill all kinds of functions. They can instruct, entertain, challenge, console. Not so long ago in Britain, stories and storytellers were relatively commonplace. Hector Urquhart, a gamekeeper, writing around the middle of the 19th century about his boyhood in Ross-shire in the Scottish Highlands, remembered:

When I was a boy, it was the custom for the young people to assemble together on the long winter nights to hear the old people recite the tales or sgeulachd, which they learned from their fathers before them. In these days tailors and shoemakers went from house to house, making our clothes and shoes... I knew an old tailor who used to tell a new tale every night during his stay in the village; and another, an old shoemaker, who, with his large stock of stories about ghosts and fairies, used to frighten us so much that we scarcely dared pass the neighbouring churchyard on our way home.

Of course, by concentrating on some details and omitting others, Hector Urquhart makes a story from his story about storytelling. (There must surely have been some people who groaned when the storyteller came to the village. "Oh no! Not the one about Jack and the Beanstalk *again!*") But he does paint a vivid picture of how a good storyteller can captivate an audience by the power of words alone.

There are a number of exercises designed to help people tell stories in public. A good one is to **take a favourite picture book and tell the story in your own words, using the pictures as an anchor and guide.**

But here I want to pass on some of the ways I've made stories with and for young children, using the songwriting ideas and some of the instruments discussed above. Some of them may work better for you than others, and you will have ideas and techniques that are entirely your own. Here are some of the ideas that work for me:

1. To repeat once more, **keep it simple and start from what you and the children know.**
2. **An episodic structure can be very useful.** Take a central character or characters (I often use the Mummy and the Baby Turtles, who are ocarinas) and lead them through a number of encounters and adventures. If there's a beginning and an ending, the middle can be as short or as long as you like.
3. **If you have a good supply of, say, puppets, noise-makers and instruments of different shapes and sizes, they may suggest a story.** You could provide a simple structure, and the children could take it in turns to fill in the narrative by choosing from whatever is on display.
4. **If you're stuck for ideas, borrow a basic structure,** or a whole plot from a favourite storybook.
5. **Use plenty of formulaic repetition, so that the children can join in.** When I tell about the night the Mummy Turtle couldn't get to sleep, each time a new disturbance takes place, we all shout, "Oi Frogs!" (or whoever's causing the disturbance *this* time), "Stop that noise! WE'RE trying to get some SLEEP!"
6. **Ask the children lots of questions.** Let them help you tell the story. You can incorporate their answers into the narrative ("And what do you think the wolf said to the hare when he stepped on his foot?"). It takes the pressure off you, and can sometimes throw up unexpected answers. (Recently I asked some primary children what the sound of the singing bowl reminded them of. A boy with autism replied that it was like an organ pipe. And he was right. But no-one had previously made that connection. We were all too busy looking at the shape of the bowl.)
7. **Use whatever opportunities are available for participation.** Get the children to give names to the characters in a story. Choose simple song structures so that they can contribute to the composition. Let them play the instruments whenever possible.