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Sharing Stories, Telling Tales

By Nancy Alder

Professional storyteller, librarian, and mother of two boys

Picture this: seventy or so kids ages two to about age five are crammed into the storytime area at the public library, along with one very harried librarian. Every time eye contact is broken to turn pages and read a picture book, the squirmiest of the kids crawl off, and older siblings follow in hot pursuit. The air is rent by sibilant whispers of "Come back here!," "I'm gonna tell Mom!," "Shh! You're bothering everyone!" and is punctuated with wails and piercing shrieks. It is not a pretty sight.

Now picture the same group in the same setting, but with a serene librarian who is in control and has no need to break eye contact and invite chaos. This librarian is—ta da—telling the stories!

Now before you say this is obvious fiction, let me tell you that the librarian in both scenes was me. I began my stint as a children's librarian doing storytime, just as it had always been done. The programs consisted of a carefully chosen blend of stories and fingerplays designed around a theme, and they fit precisely into the half hour allotted to them. My command of library materials was great; my command of the kids was not. I was engaging some of the children, but losing more. I wanted these kids to love the books as I did. Clearly a change was needed.

My switch from reading to telling stories to the kids was an automatic act of self-preservation. Only minutes into the first story time, I realized that the key to holding the children’s attention, given the size of the group and the age disparity, was to have them personally connect with the story. That meant involving them in the story and keeping them focused through eye contact, gestures, and participation.

I got through that first storytime by telling the stories we all know and can tell effortlessly—the fairy tales we had heard again and again when we were kids. I tried different things:

1. repeatedly "forgetting" my lines and having the kids correct me ("Not Little Red Raincoat! It's Little Red Riding Hood!")
2. having some of the older kids play the parts
3. telling a "fractured" version of the tales
Then I took the group over to the 398 section (folklore) and pulled various versions of the tales I had told and other fairy tales so the kids could take the stories home with them.

The storytimes I do now always include well told tales. Fables and myths, folktales and fairy tales are wonderful choices. They have a long oral tradition, and unless they are dramatically diluted, they are generally ready to be told. They don’t rely on artwork to tell their tale. Best of all, the tale can be embellished or simplified, depending on the age and interest level of your listeners.

Carefully chosen picture books can be told successfully too. Some stories just ache to be told as well as read. I compiled an annotated list of about 100 children’s books that are currently in print in Terrific Tales for Telling. These stories can be read through a time or two and then told with no finagling, character crunching, or adapting.

Select stories with the following characteristics:
1. A single, clear story line with action or suspense
2. A few colorful, interesting characters that contrast well with one another
3. Length and content that are appropriate for the interest level of the audience
4. You really like the story

Yes, I mean to emphasize that last one. If you really like a story, you will have an easier time remembering it and more fun telling it. Your enthusiasm for the tale will be evident, and to your listeners will be knocking each other down to check the book out after storytime. Besides, if you really like the characters and the story, you will put more of yourself—your own personality—into the telling. That makes the tale memorable and unique.

Before telling a story from a book, I show the audience the book itself, leaf through the pictures, and explain, "I want to tell you my version of this story." I want them to know that my telling of the tale is not exactly the same as the book. A storyteller’s personality and style become evident in as the tale is told. I don’t want my listeners to be surprised when they take the book home and discover differences.

TELLING STORIES TO YOUR YOUNGEST LISTENERS

Robert Munsch’s stories have charming illustrations by Michael Martchenko that capture kids’ imaginations. His writing, though, doesn’t rely on the illustrations to carry or add to the story. His books are perfect for storytelling. Try Munsch’s Mud Puddle or Something Good (both published by Annick Press LTD, Toronto, Canada) and experiment with telling the story to capture your listeners’ interest.
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When I tell Mud Puddle, I choose a child from among my listeners to use as a visual aid. I look for a little girl whose outfit looks like something Mom would bring home as a treat. I have the little girl come up to the front of the group, turn her this way and that, describe her outfit, and use her name as I introduce the story.

"Shayla’s mommy just loved to buy her surprises when she went shopping at K-Mart. One day she brought Shayla a really cool sweat suit with Belle and Beast on the shirt. She bought her a Beauty and the Beast headband for her hair and some blue socks that exactly matched the color of Belle’s dress."

I thank Shayla and have her return to her seat. I continue to involve the group by pausing, and letting the kids join in each time the menacing mud puddle is discovered above the little girl’s head. I have them "dress" themselves as Shayla dresses after each bath—sliding pants on one leg at a time, buttoning buttons, tying shoes, and zipping up their zippers.

Something Good involves a whole group of listeners. The story revolves around a little girl’s trip to the grocery store with her father. Dad concentrates on selecting high-nutrition foods, while the little girl wants him to buy something good like candy or cookies or ice cream. In the telling, I have little Tyya go to the candy aisle and I ask,

"Now what kind of candy do you think Tyya put in her cart?"

I call on kids with upraised hands to name the candies until I have received several suggestions, and I do the same with the cookies and ice cream. The kids love to call out their favorites.

Tall tales also lend themselves beautifully to telling. The larger-than-life characters come to life as you deepen your voice, stand with feet apart and fists on your hips and swagger through the tale. I recently read a new tall tale—Slappy Hooper by Aaron Shepard (Scribners, 1993). I loved the character and knew that children would enjoy the tale of a sign painter whose paintings become real. I didn’t think the illustrations lived up to the charm of the text—in fact, I thought that they were more of a distraction. But the story was perfect for telling! It also provides a great opportunity for listeners to share their own ideas of what Slappy could paint and what havoc could result. Kids love to volunteer their own ideas and scenarios after the tale is through.

TELLING STORIES TO OLDER CHILDREN

Don’t reserve your storytelling for just your youngest listeners. Older children love to hear stories too. I have found that reluctant readers will
suddenly develop an interest in reading after hearing some well-told tales taken from longer books. R. L. Styne’s Goosebump series, Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House books, Beverly Cleary’s Ramona books and other episodic chapter books lend themselves well to storytelling.

As you tell the story, using body language, gestures, and facial expressions, you can actually see the kids get drawn into the tale. You can convert nonreaders to readers and steer stalwart Hardy Boys fans into new realms through storytelling.

Telling stories rather than reading them permits you to connect with the listeners and enables them to relate to the story in a way that reading aloud does not. As a storyteller, you are free to liven up a story through gestures and facial expressions as well as your voice. The pictures you paint in your listener’s mind are more personally satisfying than what the picturebook provides. While a book’s artwork may be excellent, the character you create in a child’s mind through the telling of a tale will be the child’s own idea of what is beautiful enough to take the breath away; or what is so frightening that you don’t dare paint its picture.

I know what you’re thinking. You don’t have the training, innate talent, dramatic flair (you finish the list of excuses) to tell stories. Pffui. It’s like my cousin Lorraine observed when she visited my beachside home from New York City: "These rocks on the beach were killing my feet when I got here, but now they’re getting softer." Give storytelling a try. Telling stories will get easier and easier until, before you know it, you’re having a ball . . . and so are the kids.

_Terrific Tales for Telling_ is available at the BYU Bookstore, other selected area bookstores and from the author (send $6.00 to Nancy Alder at 58 West 2560 South, Orem, Utah 84058).

**Storytelling Events**

A storytelling workshop entitled "Storytelling from the Inside Out," with Nancy Alder as instructor will be held this summer at Brigham Young University. The workshop will be offered twice: July 14-15, 9:00 am - 1:30 pm and August 1-4, 5:20 pm - 8:35 pm. For more information, contact BYU Conferences and Workshops at (801) 378-4903.

The Fifth Annual Timpanogos Storytelling Festival is planned for August 26-27 at Ashton Gardens. Auditions for local storytellers will be the first week in May. Acclaimed storytellers Ed Stivender and Katherine Windham will be conducting a storytelling workshop on August 25. For more information concerning these events, call Orem Public Library at (801) 224-7161.