

*'I think children need less convincing of the importance of story than do adults... childhood tends to mean wonder, imagination, creative spontaneity, while adulthood, the loss of these perspectives. So the first task, as I see it, is restorying the adult - the teacher and the parent and the grandparent - in order to restore the imagination to a primary place in consciousness in each of us, regardless of age.'* James Hillman, 1974, 'A note on story', in 'Children's Literature: The Great Excluded', Storrs, Connecticut

**Storytelling Skills**  
**or: How stories teach what tellers learn...**  
**by Fiona Collins**

(with acknowledgements to Margaret Meek's important book:  
How texts teach what readers learn, 1988, Stroud, Glos., Thimble Press)

Margaret Meek's little book is an invaluable and enjoyable read: it considers the process of reading from the reader's, rather than the teacher's, perspective, and carries this message: Good books for children teach them much more about the reading process than they - or we - realise. She considers some well known books for children (*Rosie's Walk*, *Mr. Gumpy's Outing*, *The Jolly Postman*) and draws to our attention some of the lessons they teach which seem so obvious that we may not even recognise the learning that is taking place.

I began to wonder if her approach could also be applied to the hearing and retelling of stories as a way of identifying some of the skills which characterise *storytelling behaviour*. What follows is a first attempt to draw parallels between reading and storytelling, quoting from Meek's text and applying it to storytelling, identifying some of the important things which happen when a teller retells a well-known story, whether a traditional tale, a family story, or a story of real people or places. Listening to stories, which goes always hand-in-glove with telling them, is tucked in here too.

### Repetition

Retelling a story many times is a traditional and important way of learning both how *that* story goes, and more generally about story structure and presentation. As Meek remarks: 'Those who are good at something... achieve mastery by practice, pleasure and persistence.' She insists that what is read is as significant to the learning process as what the reader actually does. In the same way, I would suggest that the ideal material to develop storytelling skills is the body of traditional tales from many cultures: legends, myths, fairy stories, wonder tales... These stories, shaped over time by many tellers, carry embedded inside them the same teaching and modelling qualities which a supporting and encouraging adult provides when sharing a book with a child, just as Meek describes in her encounter with Ben, who discusses, hears, reads and rereads *Rosie's Walk* for an afternoon, realising in the process that 'Every time he went back to the beginning, there it was again, yet each reading yielded something more.'

Meek makes a further point on the importance of repetition and return to familiar texts, separating the story from the language in which it is told, enabling us to consider Knowledge About Language and the contribution of storytelling to this important skill: 'Children read stories they like over and over again; that's when they pay attention to the words - after they've discovered what happens', then an ability to make clear and conscious choices of the words in which the narrative is communicated.

### Independence

Meek describes an important aspect of the reading process:

To learn to read a book... a young reader has to become both the teller (picking up the authors view and voice) and the told (the recipient of the story, the interpreter). This symbolic interaction is learned early. It is rarely, if ever, taught, except in so far as an adult stands in for the author by giving the text a 'voice' when reading to the child.

In telling a story the child easily becomes both teller and told, listening to his/her own voice telling the story. Furthermore, embedded in the shape of the story is the work of all the storytellers who have told the story over time. If we know how to listen to their voices they can act as in-built teachers and guides, bringing a story shaped by many tongues to the novice teller in a form most easily remembered and recreated. It is for this reason that I suggest traditional tales as the best starting point for developing storytelling skills.

### Empowering children

Children bring their own knowledge to traditional storytelling too. Even if they have had very few experiences of hearing storytelling, somehow - probably because of the long history of interplay between oral and written texts in this culture - they will recognise some traditional openings and closings, they will know and join in with rhymes such as 'Fee-fie-foe-fum', they will have certain expectations about how the story goes, they will have a sense of closures the story nears its end. Meek picks out two very important implications for reading of this 'world of text' knowledge:

If they know stories or rhymes by heart, they bring the words to the page when they read for themselves. They discover that you can play with language.... Those who know how to recognise bits and pieces of other texts in what they read find it is like the discovery of old friends in new places. They feel they are sharing a secret with the writer.

The added enrichment when the child is retelling, rather than rereading a text, lies in the active use of all this 'world of text' knowledge to make a new and unique version of the story for that occasion and those listeners. Meek emphasises the vital social function of language. Storytelling offers an ideal setting for language as direct communication of meaning.

## Imagery

Meek discusses the importance of images in the picture books which she uses as her exemplars. In storytelling, the 'pictures in the head' inspired by the story are a powerful aspect of both the storyteller's repertoire of skills and the listener's response.

Each person's images are individual and personal, even when listeners have heard the same story. Unlike pictures in books, when the artist's concept shapes those of all the readers, in storytelling the teller does have his/her own picture in mind, but this does not impinge on the response of the listeners, leaving each of them free to create an imagined world in response to the storyteller's words. Bringing together a mixture of memories and imagination, each person's response to a story is unique.

## Truth

Another important aspect of traditional stories, and one which always engages the attention of children, is the question: is the story true? Meek discusses 'story truth' in a way which shows that she understands the importance of this issue to children:

The nature of 'made up' stories is not well enough understood by those who are confronted by the strength of imagination in childhood, when the inner and outer realities are closer together.

As children grapple with the notion that 'a story may not be true, but that doesn't mean it hasn't got a lot of truth in it', they begin to engage with the complications and richness of the traditional tale in a way which will extend their understanding of language and the many meanings it can convey, '..not only in the conventions of the realistic tale but also in the more metaphorical instances in folktales and legends.'

## Summary

This brief exploration only begins to look at the skills developed in storytelling. There are more details in the following sections on choosing, preparing and telling a story.

But there is still so much more to discover!

'The story of storytelling is a tale that will never be done.' (Angela Carter)