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When Stories Come to School

Telling, Writing, & Performing Stories in the Early Childhood Classroom

by Patsy Cooper

Goodnight Moon by Margaret Wise Brown is a simple picture book. The title says it all. "Goodnight moon. Goodnight bears. Goodnight chairs. . . . Goodnight noises everywhere." Sometime around nine months, most babies take to this book like a new and favorite food. Some parents report that by the time their children are two years old, they have heard the story over two hundred times. Why? The children can't read it. Few have probably seen a bear. The pictures, somewhat dark and old-fashioned, represent a room that is probably very different than their own. Why do they love it so, almost fifty years after it was first published?

First of all, consider, from the infant's point of view, the social and personal context of hearing the story. Nine-month-olds, of course, don't sit on the floor to hear a story, they sit in your lap. A mother's or father's lap is cozy. The story is most often read after dinner and the evening bath, and before bedtime. Baby is fed, clean, and comfortable. Going to sleep can be a routine that babies look forward to because it often brings mother's or father's attention, as well as the somatic pleasure in feeling sleepy. Life, however, isn't this simple. Around nine months or so, going to bed can also raise some fretful feelings in babies, as they become more and more conscious of their actual separateness from mother and father. No wonder elaborate routines spring up in families around the bedtime hour. Saying goodnight takes on greater and greater significance and feeling for the infant. He or she is ripe for some extension of these feelings. A story can be that extension: the text of *Goodnight Moon* plays out a real-life scenario, and even improves on it, by practicing the separation over and over again, intentionally, with loving words, and a sweet, unrushed rhythm.

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IN THIS ISSUE

Goodnight Moon's primary appeal is not literary, but developmental—at this point, the baby doesn't care if it's a book or not. Given the opportunity, however, the baby will look to other books to satisfy him or her as *Goodnight Moon* did. Simple naming or sound books such as *Babies*, *I Am a Baby Dinosaur*, and *Baby Ben's Bow Wow Book* are other favorites. The moment of true engagement with books comes when the baby becomes conscious, at least on some elemental level, that books can reflect his or her own life. My daughter Jess' experience as a twelve-month-old with *Pat the Bunny*, another classic, offers a good example. I had been reading the book to her, by popular demand, for a week or so, playfully acting out the text as I read, patting the bunny, smelling the flowers, etc. Then, on about the tenth go-round, when we got to the picture of the father shaving his scratchy beard, she wriggled out of my lap. She walked through the house until she found her own father, and she gestured for him to bend down, which he did. At this, she stroked his chin, and promptly returned to me to finish the story. For several weeks after that, this scene was repeated without fail. Indeed, Jess' urge to reenact the book was almost irrepressible. Eventually, she seemed to accept the fact that she could remember her father's beard without touching it, and was content to stroke only the illustration. In a sense, Jess had learned that her life was not the same as the story. She could identify with the story, but she could also separate herself from it. This is an important first step in a child's relationship to books.

As toddlers grow older, it is not uncommon to hear them consciously reflect on the illustrations in picture books. Books, they are discovering, can be about many things that are of general interest to them. Whereas at a year younger Jess had to demonstrate what she knew about a book through action, two- and three-year-olds simply say it, through declarations of ownership, as teachers read aloud. "*I* have a baby" or "*I* have a boat" or "My mommy has a red car." Toddlers also imitate each other's declarations of ownership, repeating—true or not—the assertions of friends. There is no need to challenge these assertions. "You do?" or "Okay" is an appropriate response, because sharing grows out of owning, an important developmental issue for this age group, and the child is merely trying on some new possibilities. Again, the literary value of the book is not primary. Personal connections drive the child's interest.

Before a school meeting one evening, I heard parents of three- and four-year-olds discussing their children's favorite books. Parents, who I suspected read regularly to their children, reported that as the children grew out of infancy and chose their own books to be read, the books acquired a definite lifespan, some lasting as long as six months to a year. The group was laughing, because kids' reading habits and tastes were funny to them. The parents took stabs at why some books appealed more than others. One little boy wanted the same one over and over, for security's sake, said his mother. Another little guy wanted only books with machines in them. "Perpetuating gender stereotypes," his mother explained with a sigh. In one home, *Sleeping Beauty* was the only choice for bedtime reading. It was a princess phase. Another sigh. Other books didn't even make it to a second reading regardless of the wonderful illustrations or lavishness of the book.

What struck me about the parents' descriptions of their children's reading choices was the parents' willingness to be led by their children's personal pursuit of stories. It wasn't just that they knew reading in the early childhood years was a factor in school success. They seemed to take pleasure in the fact that children pursued their favorite stories for some inherent, basic developmental need. In contrast, parents who see their children's relationship to books merely as a measure of later academic success are often anxious that their children be taught to read as soon as possible. This type of parent usually meets resistance from their children, however, and almost always from their children's pre-school teachers, who wish parents would stick to parenting and let teachers do the teaching. But teachers should emulate parents such as those at our school meeting that night. Children who have been read to at home for the pleasure of it, and who, in addition, have writing materials (mainly paper, crayons, pencils) at their

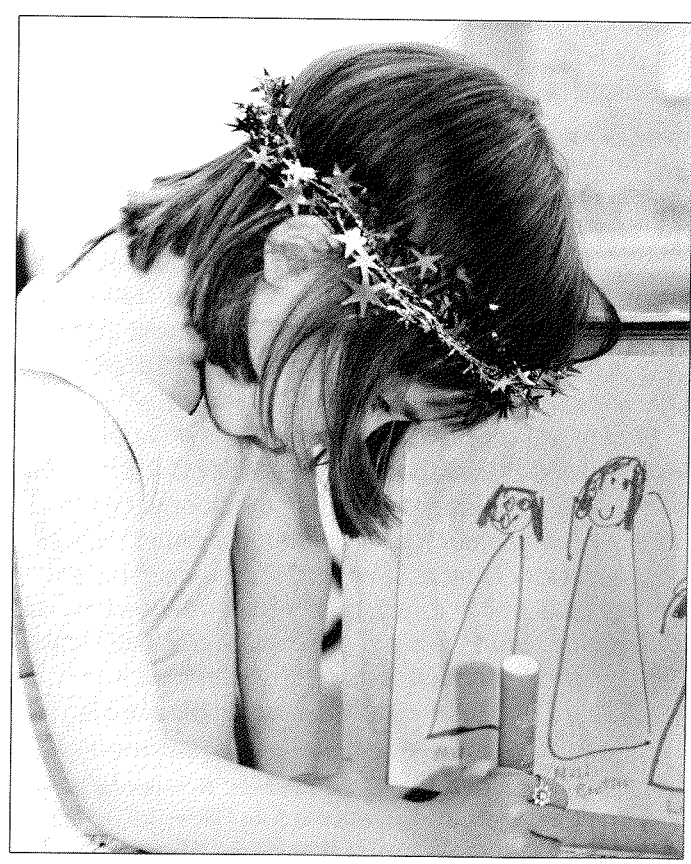


Photo: Monica Rascoe

A Sleeping Beauty phase.

disposal usually arrive in our pre-schools with very positive feelings about books and stories. On average, they learn to read easily in due time. This should be more than a directional sign for us as educators of young children, it should be a warning sign.

Another significant difference between stories in school and stories in the home is the way in which children's play at home will often contain elements from their favorite books. "Who's that tripping over my bridge?" roared a three-year-old, whose favorite book at the moment was *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, as he played with small plastic people-like figures on the living room rug. He had one figure hiding under the lid of his Lego container, while he tramped the other across it. Parents tend to support this kind of play through their approval of it, though rarely systematically. Pre-schools don't actively discourage book-related play, nor do they cultivate it, which would be simple to do in the classroom. Dramatization of books is one sure way to do it. Another way is the creation of story baskets, which were first shown to me by Houston teacher Mary-o Yeager. She is always on the lookout for any cheap commercial figures that either represented book characters or could substitute for them. Small plastic figures of the cast of *Snow White*, for example, can be found in many toy stores, teachers' catalogues, or at Disneyland and Disney World, of course. After reading the book to the children, Ms. Yeager simply puts the figures in a basket with the book and displays it prominently in the room, where it can be played with during appropriate times. Figures for *The Three Little Pigs, The Three Bears,* and *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* are easy to find in any toy farm or zoo collection.

Using Stories on Video

Another way that stories can spill over into children's lives at home is through the judicious use of videos. When I was in high school, my friends and I worried that seeing *Gone with the Wind* on film might "ruin the book." How wrong we were. Likewise, my experience has been that a child who loves the *Madeline* or *Babar* books will love them even more after seeing the movies. (Madeline and Babar stuffed dolls are also available, along with other popular picture book characters, such as Max from *Where the Wild Things Are.*)

Any parent with a VCR can take advantage of the video explosion to stimulate a child's interest in books. Since the film version of a book is rarely the same as the book itself, experiencing both of them offers lots of opportunities for parent and child to talk about what amounts to literary ownership. By contrasting the book and the movie, if only in terms of which one they liked better, even very young children can see that stories and books can be changed for better or worse. This in turn helps them to become more critical readers and viewers in the future, as well as to assume more control over their own writing. A further advantage of videos is that a film version of a book or story can make a more difficult piece more accessible for a child, either before a parent reads it or before the child attempts to read it alone. *The Chronicles of Narnia*, for example, became a popular read-aloud book with some first grade children and parents only after the PBS version was aired. Prior knowledge of how the plot unfolds, as well as visual images of Narnia and the odd cast of characters, gave these young listeners the patience to wade through the book's rather detailed descriptions when it was read to them.

Sometimes literary success through videos comes quite unintentionally. One Friday evening, on a whim, I decided to rent Shirley Temple's *Heidi*, one of my favorite movies from childhood. My four-and-a-half-year-old daughter Kyle and I cried our way through the story of the Swiss orphan who was kidnapped from her home in the Alps, subjected to the cruelty of the awful Fraulein Rottenmeir, and finally reunited with her grandfather. Despite Kyle's obvious enjoyment of the movie, I was surprised when in the ensuing weeks *Heidi* became one of the "stories" she asked me to retell over and over, even though we had not read the book yet. Kyle's fascination with the Heidi story continued for a couple of months. My husband and I would find her tending to the "goats" (a stuffed dog and bear), or acting out other parts of the story, or running from room to room yelling, "Grandfather, Grandfather, where are you, Grandfather?" She had a corduroy skirt and vest with a Swiss look about it that became the outfit of choice. Next, she began to pick up the nearest available book and pretend it was *Heidi*, and proceed to "read" it aloud to herself.

At this point I offered to read her the original story by Johanna Spyri. Thus far I had avoided it, fearing the old-fashioned style and vocabulary were too advanced for a child under five. But these were learning-to-read issues, and by then I had a mother's goal: to provide another way to extend Kyle's deeply satisfying play in whatever way possible. So, lacking mountains and goatherds, I resorted to the book. I counted on Kyle to tell me, either by word or action, if it was too hard for her. In fact the book is far too difficult for a pre-schooler's comprehension, yet night after night Kyle begged me to read just one more chapter. I was fairly certain that most of it was over her head, but her memory of the basic story line (from the movie version) seemed to carry her through the lengthy descriptions of nature and Spyri's philosophical musings.

During the two weeks it took me to read the book aloud, Kyle's role as a listener to stories began to blossom into that of a reader of stories. She now began to insist that I run my finger under the words as I read aloud. She also

started to interrupt my reading, something she had never done before, to ask where I was on the page. She would then look intently at the words, as if to discover something. Up to this point, she had never demonstrated any particular knowledge of print. Unlike most of her four-year-old friends, she had not been taught to write her name, nor did she show a lot of interest in the alphabet in general, though she loved to draw. Suddenly, towards the end of the book, she began to ask me to teach her to read. She moaned about all the books she couldn't read, especially *Heidi*. I told her that teaching children to read wasn't my job, but that she would learn in due time. Then one afternoon when we were almost at the end of the book, she stood on the bed, put her hands on her hips, and asked firmly, "WHEN are you going to teach me to read?" She was furious with me.

Vygotsky wrote that "the teaching of reading and writing must be organized in such a way that it becomes necessary for something."[1] Necessary in the children's lives, not the parents' or the teachers'. The story of Kyle and *Heidi* is a good example of a child's becoming invested in print, in what the words say, in what the story reveals to her about people—what Margaret Donaldson calls "human intentions"—and the world they inhabit. This is what stories can do. What proved to be a pivotal experience in Kyle's life (she started reading on her own soon afterwards) began with an old movie on video. There are lots of wonderful old movies based on children's classics that parents indulge in because these films feel good, or because they bring back pleasant memories of childhood, or because they're simply great stories. Children can sense their parents' positive attitude as they watch these movies. Invariably, if the books themselves are available afterwards, children's curiosity will be aroused, and they will open them.

Stories for Children Who Have Failed

In 1983, due to family circumstances, I took a job as a long-term substitute teacher for a class in a relatively poor school on eastern Long Island whose teacher had taken an emergency medical leave. The principal told me little except that I would have a class of eighteen children who were chronologically eligible for third grade, but who were all reading well below grade level. I remember that he very carefully pointed out that none of the children had tested learning-disabled in any way. "Why can't they read?" I asked. He shrugged his shoulders.

I soon learned the principal was right. The children couldn't read anywhere near grade level. My job, according to the school district reading specialists, was to instruct them in the DISTAR method (Direct Instruction Teaching Arithmetic and Reading). In actuality, DISTAR was only the first of four programs in a six-month period that I was told to use with the children. There was no mention of dropping one program for the other. "Give up science," a co-teacher suggested when I complained of a lack of time. No one seemed to wonder about the absurdity of four different phonics-based programs to serve one problem. Again, there was no mention of writing of any kind. All four programs were far more mind numbing than any phonics worksheet I had seen in kindergarten. All used controlled vocabularies and contrived stories, though DISTAR was by far the worst. DISTAR even came with a prepared set of questions for the teacher. I'll never forget my disbelief when I perused the Teacher's Guide. There in blue ink were the words I was to say. The children's responses were printed in black (or vice versa). How could the authors dare to predict what children would say? I wondered, still somewhat naïve in the world of educational quick-fixes. The teacher's script had been written in such a way that it elicited the exact, stated response from the children. The first time it happened I stared at the children in disbelief. If it didn't feel a little like a scene from Orwell's *1984*, it could have been funny.

It didn't surprise me that the children made little progress in the first couple of months. Who could, any reasonable person might argue, when the morning's story included sentences such as "The tramp tamped the ramp with his lamp." What did this mean? The Teacher's Guide said something about "phonetic families."

One day I brought in a Liza Minnelli album because it had a song I wanted to try out on the kids. I wrote her name on the board and pronounced it several times, pointing to the syllables with a ruler. Many kids in the class were Italian or hispanic and the last name gave them no trouble. There was a dark-haired little girl named Liza in the class, however. We talked about the name Liza, about how it was slightly different than the more popular Lisa, but easy to mistake for it if you read too quickly. Apparently, there were several Lisas in the other classes, and our Liza was continually being mixed up with them. I then played the song "Liza with a Z," an hilarious account of Minnelli's frustration with having her name mispronounced all of her life. How could the children help but get the point, with such detailed lyrics as "It's Liza with a *z*, not Lisa with an *s*, 'cause Liza with a *z* goes *zzz* not *sss*"? And "If I were *Ruth* then I'd be *Ruth*, because with *Ruth* what can you do? Or Kathy or Susan. . . ." The song goes on, and just when Minnelli seems to convince the listener she just can't take it anymore, she hears someone say, "Look, there she goes—Liza—Minn*ulli*." A very funny lesson in double consonants follows next.

The children responded with shrieks of laughter. I had to play the song two more times. It was clear that at least some of them were beginning to understand that reading was, in part, determined by the sounds of the letters, and,

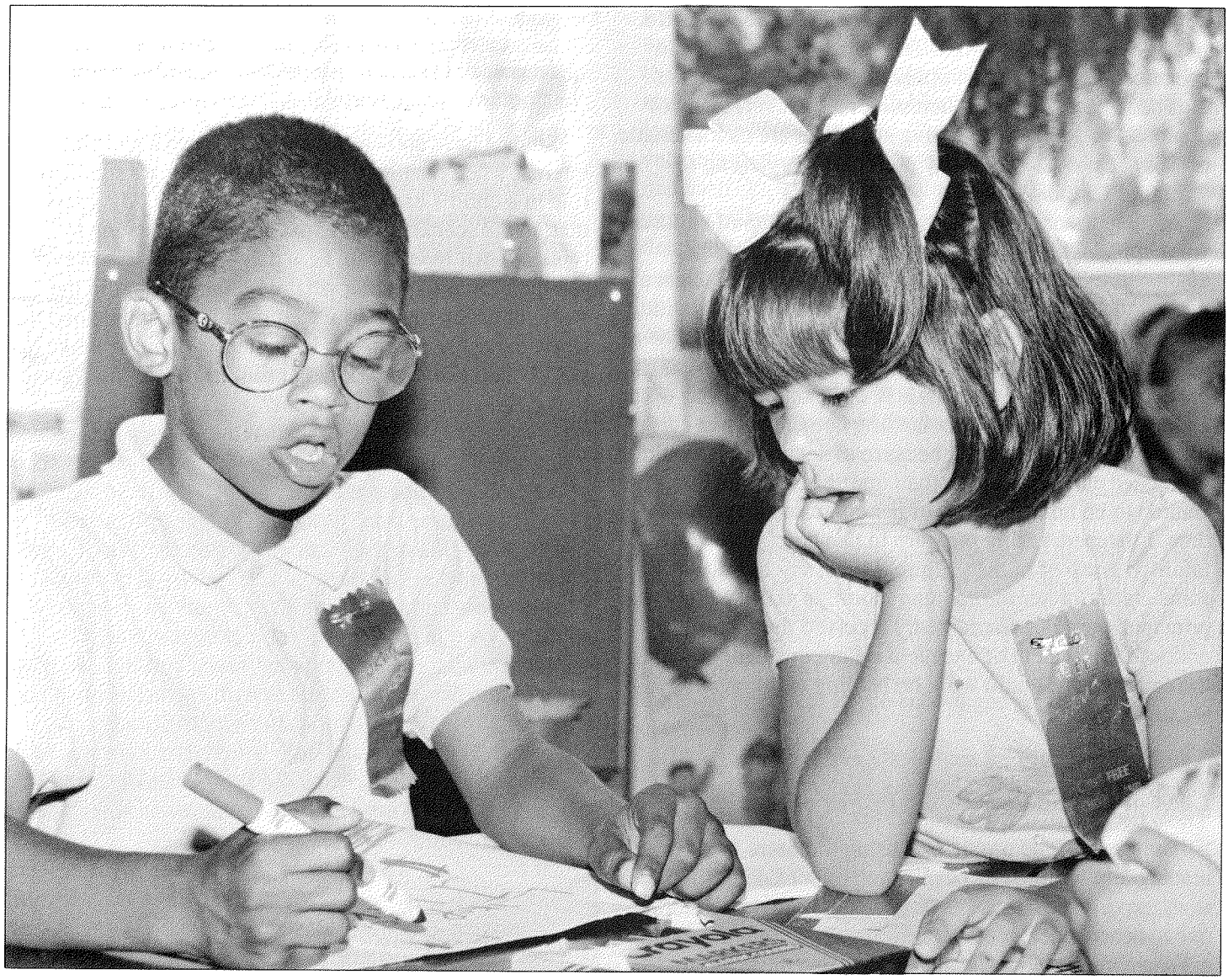


Photo: Monica Rascoe

A kindergartener telling her classmate her story.

in part, by assumptions about what the words on the page might say. *Liza* could easily be misread as *Lisa*, and vice versa, depending on whether you read the consonant correctly or let your expectations guide you. This was an important lesson for a group of kids who had been taught that real reading always followed strict rules, an understandable position, given their usual reading fare. I was congratulating myself on being such a clever teacher, when Derrick asked, "How did they (meaning the record company, presumably) know about Liza?" I realized immediately that he meant Liza R., the eight-year-old in our class, not Liza Minnelli. The song was so relevant, so pertinent to his experience, that he thought it had been written for our class. He had created a story to fit what he knew.

From the beginning I told the children stories, despite the overloaded schedule, and they loved them as much as my kindergarten students had in Chicago. The themes of these stories were not the same, of course. Five-year-olds are interested in appearing much older than three- and four-year-olds, or in the time of castles, kings, and queens, or in the silly consequences of putting your clothes on backwards. Eight- and nine-year-olds prefer stories about realistic mysteries and challenges. I set these stories on the wharves and fishing boats that dotted the eastern shore of Long Island, where many of these children's parents were employed. Another difference in making up stories for eight-, nine-, and ten-year-olds was that they became very intrigued with the process of storytelling itself. They wondered how I knew those things. How could I make them up? I talked about how I find story materials in things that people care about or that happen every day, and then I add a twist of mystery or silliness or sadness. They listened to my explanations as if these, too, were stories.

Eventually the kids, or at least most of them, began to make some progress in reading and writing, as evidenced

not by the workbook tests, but by their abilities to read a passage from a book to me. The "Liza with a Z" lesson became a model for most phonetic problems, while the kids became storytellers themselves. However, many of them had the poor handwriting skills that are characteristic of "low achievers," and they preferred storytelling to writing. I let them do both.

My experience with this very special group of children was capped when, towards the end of the year, I was evaluated by the principal. He arrived during the science period, which was rotten luck for me, or so I thought until Erin answered my question about salmon swimming upstream to die. Actually, she didn't answer it, she expanded on it, by telling us how her grandmother was dying and had come home from a nursing home. She was sort of like the salmon, Erin said, because even though it would have been easier for her in the nursing home, she just wanted to be home near all of her children and grandchildren. I listened, taking pleasure in this quiet little girl's intuitive grasp of human nature. I must say I also took some credit for her burgeoning narrative skills. Surely the principal would be impressed. I received the school district's equivalent of excellent on my evaluation, with the comment: "Should work on helping children stick to the topic."

Lack of Confidence in the Power of Stories

As I see it, half the problem in using literature to teach reading and writing has been a lack of confidence in the story experience itself. While educators say that children *like* to hear stories, we don't always appreciate the inherent academic value of *listening* to stories. Instead, we impose on stories a myriad of objective-driven activities that can prevent the fulfillment of the young child's role as listener and beneficiary of stories and the many academic lessons to be gained indirectly.

In far too many classrooms, in the name of Whole Language, listening to stories is accompanied by a set of formal questions asking the children to predict from the pictures what will happen next or to change the ending. A case study in *The Whole Language Kindergarten* describes one such situation:

> When Kathy [a Whole Language teacher in training] recalled the read-aloud activities she had seen when she visited the Whole Language classrooms, she remembered that many of the teachers brainstormed with the children and discussed several ideas related to the book, before beginning to read the story. One teacher spent almost five minutes having the children tell what they already knew about the two characters, Frog and Toad, before she read to them. Then the children looked at (sampled) the picture and print on the outside cover of the book to make predictions about the story. As the teacher read to the children she paused periodically to let the children confirm that their predictions were accurate or to change their predictions, as they heard new information in the story.[2]

Studies have shown that the way parents and children interact when reading stories together plays a significant role in a child's early literacy development. My guess is that, in the scenario above, the teacher was trying to replicate that interaction. Few parents I know, however, ask their child to predict what will happen next in the story, or check to see how well their child understood the story, except in the most general terms ("Did you like that story?" and not "Why do you think Big Anthony wanted to use Strega Nona's magic pot?").

When I watch self-described Whole Language teachers select a new story, and then proceed to ask the class six or seven questions about the story (which the children haven't even heard yet), ask them to make predictions based on the title or the pictures, or stop the story to ask the children what will happen next or why they think a certain character is behaving in a certain way, I want to shout: "Down in front! You're blocking our view!" If stories are naturally appealing to young children, then why not let them have a natural life? With each rereading, and some carefully placed explanations by the teacher, the children will understand a little better. Teachers should also give the children the chance to invent their own questions ("Does anyone have any questions about what happened to Big Anthony?").

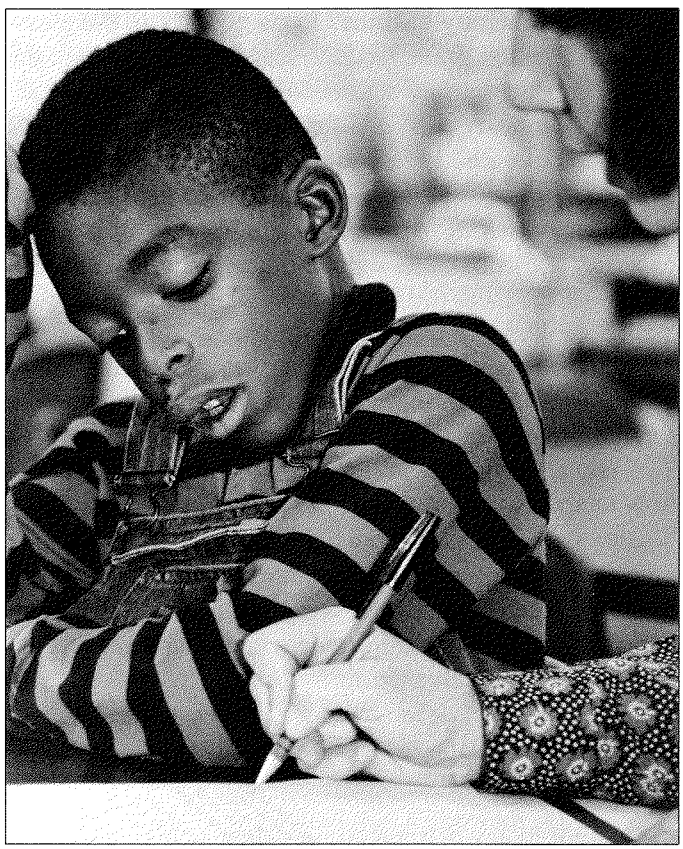
Of course, not all stories are worth repeating. Teachers need to watch for stories that "catch on," stories that fulfill some deep understanding of human intentions, or express a developmental concern, or arouse our curiosity: these are the stories that should lead a curriculum of hearing stories, knowing them, and—if they appeal—reliving them through writing, drama, or retelling. These are the stories that would bear up under a select few academic lessons. These are the activities that should constitute a true literature-based curriculum.

Whole Language, Dictation, and Writing

In recent years, our understanding of how young children become writers has taken some enormous leaps. The traditional "learning to print" approach has given way to one that stresses learning to write as real writers are said to do. We now see classrooms in which children regularly write journals, notes, messages, poems, and stories. These are exciting classrooms to be in. Whole Language, together with the writing process movement (in its less prescriptive forms), has contributed much to this progress in the writing curriculum.

At the same time, in some classrooms, I see a growing insistence on certain approaches to writing that seem inappropriate to many children under eight. It should not be assumed that what children are capable of at ten and twelve years old, they are also capable of at eight or six or four. If a phonics-based, scope-and-sequence curriculum puts reading and writing into neat little patterns that defy what we know about reading and writing, some popular writing techniques defy what we know about child development. Take story writing. Before we ask young children to write their stories, they must first learn about writing stories as something real people do. Vygotsky wrote that development, or mastery, is preceded by learning, and

Photo: Monica Rascoe



Child watches as the teacher writes down his story.

learning will always involve some degree of imitation of more competent others.[3] In other words, in order to become writers young children must have plenty of opportunities to observe and imitate people writing, including teachers, older children, and, ideally, parents. In some classrooms, however, children's understanding of where stories come from is taken for granted. Instead of modeling for children, teachers begin with simply finding the right topic. Since many five-, six-, seven-, and eight-year-olds without prior experience in story writing don't really understand the relationship between what they can imagine and what can be written down, many "pre-writing" or "brainstorming" sessions don't prepare them for the next step: writing. The fact is that beginning writers don't write because they have something they want to say, they write in order to discover what they have to say, just as they play with blocks, and on the playground, letting the ideas just flow. This is why I see dictation as so valuable to the young storyteller. Subtly and over time, dictation helps teach the child-author that a written story is merely an oral one put into print. Dictation also helps demystify the orthographic features of print, such as the movement of words from left to right, top to bottom, the space between words, punctuation marks, and so on, because it offers the child an opportunity to scrutinize the way in which words come out of the teacher's pen. The child's investment in his or her own story is what keeps him or her interested in the page of writing.

Invented Spelling

Another technique meant to empower young writers that runs the risk of backfiring—especially when overemphasized—is invented spelling. Of all the ideas that have emanated from the current research in reading and writing, including Whole Language, invented spelling is probably the most prevalent in pre-school and primary grade classrooms.

In my opinion, there is a place for invented spelling in any progressive writing curriculum. Children younger than eight hardly can be expected to know how to spell every word they can say. They should have every opportunity to guess at how words are spelled, throughout the curriculum. When they're writing, they should be aware that spelling can be corrected later. The most important thing young writers should learn is that the idea counts above all. The problem with invented spelling comes when teachers insist on its use at all times. I have observed this attitude more often than I care to admit. For example, in response to a pre-kindergarten child asking, "Teacher, how do you spell *hospital*?" her teacher answered, "Spell it the way it sounds." When the child looked a little dismayed, the teacher next asked, "How do *you* think it should be spelled?" It was clear that the child did not have the answer to her own question, so how could she answer the teacher's? These should not be rote responses, given in the name of making children feel good about their own immaturity. Given automatically, without reflection on the child before us, these responses don't acknowledge the possibility that the child *needs* to know the correct answer for reasons beyond his or her writing development. I find that when a child does not accept, or appears frustrated with, an insistence on invented spelling, there is often a tie-in to his or her understanding of rules in general, as well as a growing awareness that words have a correct and incorrect spelling.

We know that young children grow into an appreciation of rules as standards for behavior. In the process, they go from appearing oblivious to rules to insisting on rules for rules' sake, somewhere between four and seven. Later, when children develop a fuller understanding of a rule's purpose, they relax their control. The development of young children's relationship to rules is a fascinating process, and it affects their learning in all areas, from language development to science to board games. The same young children who played games such as Candy Land or Chutes and Ladders with their own idiosyncratic sense of what was required eventually enjoy playing correctly—and are very attracted to games with more complicated rules such as Checkers and Monopoly. They become frustrated when younger brothers and sisters, or less mature classmates, "won't play right." On the playground or baseball field, they are busily cultivating an appreciation for not stepping on the lines, or three strikes and you're out. By six and seven and eight years old, children know that you can reach perfection in school—100—and that anything less means that something is wrong.

The same idea applies to a child's developing awareness of the rules of spelling. One first grade boy in a Whole Language classroom in Houston, for example, brought home a piece of paper on which he had completed the sentence "I like to. . . ." His read, "I like to play ball." His mother was curious. "Tony, you hate to play ball." "I know," answered Tony, "but I didn't know how to spell watch television." This interested Tony's mother, for only the year before he had had no trouble inventing the spelling of a word. In a year's time, however, he had come to the realization that words have a conventional spelling, a right way. Moreover, by first grade he knew that a word's spelling was directly tied to its readability: until he could approximate his intention more accurately, he didn't want to take the risk of being misunderstood.

Halfway across the country, in a New York public school, a new first grade teacher told me that many of her children could not carry out this same activity, which had been prescribed by her school's Whole Language specialist. They could not finish "in their own words" sentences that she gave them, such as "When it snows I like to. . . ." The children said they didn't know how to spell some of the words they wanted to include in their sentences. When she reminded them that "spelling doesn't count," and pressed them to write the words "the way they sounded," they still refused. Flat out refused. The teacher, who had not been trained in Whole Language, was very frustrated. She wanted to help the children spell the words, but felt that it would undermine the "in their own words" dictum. "I thought Whole Language was not supposed to emphasize rules," she observed. "But, believe me, some of the ideas sure feel like rules. And we are not supposed to challenge them."

I felt sorry for this new teacher, and for the reading specialists in her school. I'm sure they all wanted to do right by the children. But if they were all to watch these first graders on the playground, if they could listen to them in their play, if they could hear them discuss what constitutes 100 on a test, they would know why insistence on invented spelling can stymie a beginning writer who has moved into an awareness of rules.

So when, in the interest of promoting creative writing, we insist that spelling doesn't matter, we are often ignoring an individual child's developing sense of correctness, inadvertently creating a resistance to writing. How to strike the necessary balance? Let's go back to the classroom of the first grade teacher. Regardless of where the children or the teacher stands on invented spelling, the teacher obviously can't spell every word for every child—this would set a bad precedent for future writing activities. The teacher could acknowledge the children's needs, however, by saying: "Okay, some of the words you want to write, you won't know how to spell. If you want to, guess—spell them the way you think they should be spelled. But if you want my help, let me know, and I will spell up to two words [or three or four, depending on the size of the class] for each of you. If you have more words that you're unsure of, write them down the best way you can, and underline them. As I come around I'll tell you how to spell them correctly." A response in this vein acknowledges the children's great concern about spelling, while it deals with the impracticality of the teacher's having to spell every single word. Out of necessity, then, not unawareness, the children are encouraged to spell some words on their own.

Remaining Flexible

This is not to say that techniques such as invented spelling don't work some of the time for some children. It's just that they can't be strictly interpreted at the expense of our knowledge that a child's personal history, his or her general development, and the learning curve are all intertwined. Unless we acknowledge the relationship between learning and development, stories and the children's interest in writing their own stories will be lost in the curriculum. Their voices will be silenced.

Teachers—especially the kindergarten, first and second grade teachers—need to remain flexible in their methods in teaching reading and writing. They need to trust their own instincts and be responsive to individual students. We have waited a long time for stories and writing to be valued in the school curriculum. Let's not give them away to formulas.

My greatest worry over current practice, however, is that pre-school and primary teachers who are sincerely experimenting with new ideas, such as portfolio evaluation, may run out of time to get it right, for there are once again black clouds on the horizon. Most teachers agree that a natural or holistic approach to the teaching of reading and writing doesn't pay off in test scores before third grade. Parents and administrators or state boards don't like to wait until third grade for good testing results. Nine years old, it seems, is too late to wait for cultivated, mature readers and writers. Teachers are, once again, faced with a "just in case" crisis in choosing a curriculum. In some school districts, phonics instruction is regaining ground. And in some cases teachers have absolutely no other choice.

My frustration with the current state of affairs in teaching reading to young children is caused by the reliance on activities *about* stories, rather than on stories themselves. In teaching writing to young children, I worry that we are teaching the *craft* of writing, without having helped these newcomers discover the *soul* of it. I would like to see all teachers considering the possibility that young children can become readers and writers for the sake of stories—including their own—that reflect their personal histories and their developmental stages. After all, in much the same way, they learned to walk, talk, ride a bike, and play ball. The truth is that young children continually reveal to us what they know, or are in the process of knowing, about reading and writing, if only we will take the time to discover it.

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1. Vygotsky, Lev S., *Mind in Society*, p. 117.
2. Raines, Shirley C., and Canady, Robert J., *The Whole Language Kindergarten*, p. 24.
3. Vygotsky, pp. 86–88.

Patsy Cooper's article consists of excerpts from her new book *When Stories Come to School*, which T&W has just published. The book offers teachers and parents a wonderful and natural way to help young children begin to read and write: placing stories at the heart of the early childhood curriculum. *When Stories Come to School* includes an in-depth discussion of the developmental and pedagogical roles that stories can play, as well as a practical guide to having children tell their own stories and perform them with their classmates. The book is available for $11.95 from Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003-3306. Shipping is free.

PLUGS

T&W is proud to announce that its *Playmaking: Children Writing and Performing Their Own Plays,* by Daniel Judah Sklar, received the American Alliance for Theatre & Education's Distinguished Book Award for 1992, and has already gone into a second printing.

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Children's Book Press continues to issue wonderful multicultural books and audiocassettes for children, specializing in folktales and contemporary stories from minority and new immigrant cultures. Many of the texts are bilingual. For a catalogue, contact Children's Book Press, 6400 Hollis St., Suite 4, Emeryville, CA 94608, tel. (510) 655-3395.

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The Museum of the City of New York has brought out *Walt Whitman and New York*, a history education kit for use with intermediate school students (although adaptable to other grade levels). The kit includes an introduction, instructional strategies and activities, suggestions for studying Whitman's poetry (by T&W's Dale Worsley), and reproductions of period paintings, photographs, and prints from the Museum's collections. Available from the Museum Shop, Museum of the City of New York, Fifth Ave. at 103rd St., New York, NY 10029 for $8.95 plus $2 shipping and handling. For more information, call (212) 534-1672, ext. 227.

Waking Up the Storyteller Inside Us

Three Writing Exercises

by Helena Worthen & Julian Levy

Many people who are writing fiction and trying to get better at it think they want the answers to questions such as these: How can I tell whether the piece I'm working on has a story in it or not? How do I go from my life to a story? How do I know when adding a character will make a situation work better? How do I know when to include a certain character's point of view? How many points of view can I have in the same scene? How do I make a story have suspense? When do the characters themselves have to talk, and when can the narrator speak for them? When does the narrator count as a character? How do I keep from feeling inhibited about writing fiction based on real people who might recognize themselves in the story? What if they recognize me? How do I put background information into the story without interrupting what's going on? How much description is the minimum? How much is too much? Why is it that some stories are loved by everybody even though they're not very well written, and other stories aren't loved by anybody even though they are well written?

These sound like practical, straightforward questions about the art of storytelling, but in fact they're deceptive: stating them as questions makes you think there are "answers" and leads you to think that if you can just find the answers and apply the rules they come from, "good writing" will ensue. It's not true. There are no rules that will automatically make anyone write well.

Although these questions are deceptive, the problems that make people ask them are perfectly real, and these problems do have solutions. The solutions always consist in the writer learning to *do* something, rather than being *told* something. How does a teacher help? A teacher can help by conducting the student through a sequence of writing *actions*. The exercises below show students how they can create solutions to the questions asked above.

But, you might ask, why exercises? What can you do with an exercise that you can't do with your "own" writing? You can experiment in an exercise. It's much harder to experiment with you "own" work. Whatever you're working on outside of the exercise is part of a larger process driven by your own desire to tell the story; it's connected to your life in ways you probably aren't always conscious of, and don't need to be conscious of. You may feel willing to isolate a piece of the story to experiment with, but the momentum of the process will work against you in this. Furthermore, changes you make in one part will produce changes you hadn't planned for in other parts. An exercise, on the other hand, is a fresh start, brought into existence for the specific purpose of being experimented with. It stands alone, and nothing but the exercise itself is at risk. This gives you great freedom to work in new ways.

In an exercise, you can confront the underlying structure of a problem. There are certain kinds of problems that occur again and again in the work of people who are serious about writing. Each kind of problem occurs in many guises, but those occurrences are similar in their underlying structure. It is the underlying structure that the exercise focuses upon: you work with what is generic about each problem rather than what is particular about its appearance at one specific place in your own work. You learn to recognize the underlying structure—not just this time, but for the future, too.

In these exercises, you get more than one chance at the problem. They ask you for multiple solutions at a single sitting. You find that you actually can solve the problem several different ways in half an hour; that coming to grips with the problem is not only possible—it can be exhilarating. You get used to coming up with solutions.

How do these exercises work?

They are group exercises. You can do them by yourself, but it's better if you do them in a group. Each exercise requires one session.

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They are writing exercises, not exercises in reading and interpreting. However, the exercises will make use of all these skills.

The exercises are timed. Most are broken down into steps, and for each step a time limit is suggested. When the time elapses, everyone stops writing.

After you write, you read your work aloud to each other and discuss the results. You learn not only from what you write, but also from what other people write, and from everyone's responses to what each person writes.

These are not competitive exercises. The situation they create is one in which no individual member of the group will consistently turn out to be the star. Nor will anyone fail consistently to write something worthwhile. An immediate effect of these exercises is that a writer whose work has not been getting much attention will reveal unexpected abilities.

The writing instructions for each step tell you what's required and then they get out of your way. Generally, the briefer the instructions, the more free and energetic the writer's responses.

A special note of encouragement for people who don't know how to get themselves started, or who are suffering through a case of writer's block: it's very hard to sit at a table with a lot of people who are writing and flipping pages in their notebooks and not write anything. For a writer who has not been writing, for whatever reason, *any words at all* that make it onto the paper are better than none. You may not use what you write right away, but who knows what thoughts it may stimulate a year from now, or twenty years from now?

Is the group necessarily a class? No. Although these exercises can be used by a writing teacher, they are designed for a group process that doesn't rely on one member of the group's being significantly more experienced than the others.

Why work in a group?

Working in a group is consonant with our most basic motivation for writing—to connect with others and to be understood by them. Our awareness of other individuals who will "read us" at some later time is implicit in every act of writing. When we develop our work in the presence of other, real individuals, our own impulse to connect is met by their complementary desire to understand. This engagement makes our writing more curious, playful, brave; it encourages us to explore, to test limits, to see how much we can give. It encourages us to try harder to know what we mean, and to choose the most incisive form possible. It is in order to restore the indispensable reality of engagement that some writers create a setting in which they can be both writers and readers for one another.

What can we anticipate when we create such a setting? Many of us are old hands at reading and interpreting, but novices at writing, in the sense that those of us who haven't completed a first novel or a collection of short stories consider ourselves novices. As readers, many of us are experienced and comfortable not only with the act of interpreting what we read, but also with the act of articulating our responses for the benefit of another person. Writers who, for the moment, can't perceive the quality of their own work very clearly and may not know what to do with it next—not just because it's their own, but also because they haven't had enough practice in writing—will often be able, in that same moment, to be acutely perceptive about the work of other writers, in a way that can help the others take a next step. Each writer, listening and responding to the work of another, will be in the role of the teacher; when reading his or her own work aloud, he or she will be the student and the rest of the group will be the teachers.

In this way, the group setting supports and amplifies our capacities to teach each other. But in an additional sense, the group as a whole becomes the teacher as well. The great benefit of having people work together is the power with which it elicits and supports the action of writing—and that it does so whether an individual teacher is present or not. The effect is essentially social and cooperative, and it becomes stronger the longer the group works together.

Ultimately, every writer needs to become his or her own teacher, and therefore his or her own student as well. This must be learned, and—though the idea may seem paradoxical at first—it is far easier to learn when you work with a group than when you work alone. In the group, you practice again and again the experience of being a teacher to others, and also the experience of being the student—learning to answer the call to action; learning to take in a response that tells you something new. You discover how to make these processes work, and ultimately, how you can apply them to yourself—which you must do in order to produce writing about which you can say, "Now I've got it the way I want it."

1. Quick Plots

A great temptation is to try to write a grand story that goes on forever. This exercise forces you to think in terms of completeness.

The exercise is supposed to be stressful. It asks you to make snap choices and put them down on paper and get on with the next choice. It's especially good to do this one in a group. If you wish, you can extend the time allotment for each step—from the prescribed three minutes to five, for example—but keep the allotments the same for each step.

Do not read ahead of the step you're working on. Do not allow any extra time to revise, erase, look around at what other people are doing, or worry about what other people are writing.

1. Three minutes. Write a story with three characters. By story, we mean tell something that happens: an event, with some tension and some resolution.
2. Three minutes. Write another story with three characters.
3. Three minutes. Write a story with two characters.
4. Three minutes. Write another story with two characters.
5. Three minutes. Write a story with eight characters, seven of whom belong to a group. Hint: If eight seems like too many characters, simplify the task by visualizing the situation, in a mental snapshot, before you write.
6. Three minutes. Write a story with only one character.
7. Three minutes. One more time, write a story with three characters.

If you are working in a group, read your work out loud. Take notes on what you observe about other people's work. Discuss. Give the authors your notes on their work.

At the start of this exercise someone always says, "What? A whole story, in three minutes?" Yes, you must tell us something that happened, there have to be three people involved, and you only have three minutes to do it. The reason step 2 repeats step 1 is that you may have used a story for step 1 that you had lying around in your memory, rather than make up a new one. Step 3 uses only two characters, but are two characters easier than three? This exercise can feel like a horrible game in which everyone else is winning and you are falling hopelessly behind in some kind of nightmare of futile activity. One benefit of doing this in a group is that you always find out that even if you feel this way, what you've written will turn out to be just as good as what other people have written.

The most important thing to observe in this exercise is the relationship between the number of characters you use and the kind of thing that can happen in your story—that is, the kind of change that can take place. What kind of change is possible if you have just one character? What kind of change is possible if you have two or three—or a group of characters? If a story has only two characters, usually the writer has to rely on something from outside—the weather, illness, an act of God, a crime, or a political event—to make change take place in their lives. Three characters give you more maneuvering room; they can act independently on each other. A group is often treated like a single character with multiple voices.

Several familiar problems are addressed at once in this exercise. These problems tend to get solved very crudely, just because of the time pressure: people hack their way through and force a solution, which is fine. But then they feel bad about what they've done. They say, "Oh, mine's no good, I just put down whatever came into my head." Yes, and that's the point: more often than not, this exercise reveals strengths and attributes that you don't know you have, and it creates a situation in which other people can observe this and say to you, "Hey, you're good at such-and-such." This is partly because there is a *succession* of examples, so that the listeners can discern a pattern and say "You're better at x than y," rather than just describe their response to one example and say, "I liked x."

What you write for this exercise will show you where you habitually place yourself in the story. Do you look down on your stories from above? Do you get inside one of your characters in a third-person-singular way? Do you feel strongest in the first person? Do you move easily from one character's perspective to another's?

Here are some of the strengths and weaknesses that might be revealed in this exercise:

1. A strength: imagery that reveals content. An image can tell a lot very fast. If you can *spontaneously, extemporaneously* express a relationship or a situation in an image, you have an important ability, the ability to get your thoughts across visually.
2. A strength: economical vocabulary. Nothing can substitute for the ability to pull a good word out of the air. If you're in a hurry and under time pressure, you sometimes reach for one word instead of six, and that one word is likely to be pretty good.
3. A weakness: writing by rote. Sometimes people respond to this exercise by freezing; their imaginations go rigid, so they go to their memory closet and take out something old. The "something old" is often a continuing circumstance that may be the setting for a story, but it isn't a story in itself. Adaptability—willingness to let things happen, to let the train move out of the station—is the key to success in this exercise, and writing by rote is the opposite of adaptability.
4. A weakness: description instead of story. Some writers might be called story-averse. Writers like this don't want to tell a story, don't want to leap off a bridge, even if it's only a tiny three-minute practice bridge. They like to describe, describe, describe, and may even be reluctant to acknowledge a plot when they eventually develop one—and one will develop, inevitably, the way images develop in charcoal rubbings of gravestones.
5. A strength: really startling ideas. Because this exercise has a lot of steps, people use hoarded-up ideas in the first three or four steps, and then are forced to invent new ideas in the fourth, fifth, or sixth steps. Sometimes these get really wacky, and usually the wacky ideas are terrific. They may, however, surprise and embarrass you.

Usually, when you feel that you have written something that never should have been written, you have done something good. This feeling that what you have just written borders on some kind of blasphemy, or that you have stuck your hand into the cosmic cookie jar, is one sign that you're doing the job right.

6. A strength: a glimpse of what the story knows. We have all had the experience of waking up from a vivid dream and asking ourselves, "What is that dream telling me?" as if the dream, in some way, knew something that we were not yet conscious of. When we write, we give ourselves access to this same source of knowing: we put together stories, long or short, that reveal (usually first to our readers, subsequently to ourselves) patterns, meanings, or messages that we did not know were there. You might think of this source as the Storyteller in each of us. When we set out to tell a story, we wake up the Storyteller. The Storyteller is realized most powerfully in the details of a long piece of writing; however, you can catch a glimpse of it in the Quick Plots exercises, because the requirement that you tell a complete story in three minutes will force you to resolve form and details in a way that simulates the convergence of disparate elements into a recognizable pattern as the ending looms, the "rushing home" feeling of finishing a larger work.

2. Fairy Tales: Traveling

This exercise isolates one storytelling strategy, a strategy characteristic of fairy tales, wonder tales, and adventure tales. Realistic stories can work this way, too.

Just do each step as it comes, and don't think ahead. That way you will get the full effect of the transformation that is forced onto what you write by each new circumstance. There will be plenty of explanation afterwards.

Write at least three sentences for each step.

1. Five minutes. There is a human being in an enclosed space. Tell us about this space and the human being in it.

2. Five minutes. There is also a tree in this space. Tell us about it.

3. Five minutes. There is a seat under this tree. Tell us about it.

4. Five minutes. There is a box beside this seat. Tell us about it.

5. Five minutes. There is water flowing through this space—in and out of it. Tell us about it.

6. Five minutes. An animal comes into this space. Tell us about it.

7. Five minutes. There is a window in the space that looks out of it. Tell us about the view through this window.

What you write should turn out to be a sweeping, looping fantasy that gives the listener that fairy-tale feeling of having traveled. It puts the reader on a sort of roller coaster ride: as soon as the reader has accommodated himself to one set of expectations, a new set is imposed.

In step 1, people usually place a human being in a space like those customarily designed to contain humans: rooms, cars, prison cells, outhouses, coffins. So the first set of conditions establishes a scale.

In step 2, there is usually a conflict of scale: the tree, unless modified, usually doesn't fit into a human-scale space. So the writer is likely to make the tree little or the space big. This choice makes a difference to the reader. Does the space expand or does the tree get miniaturized? The reader will experience this shrinking or expanding in his or her imagination.

In step 3, if the tree has been made little, then the seat under the tree will also be made little. The writer then has to decide whether or not to shrink the human to accommodate the seat.

In step 4, the box beside the seat can't contain much unless the writer can visualize it as bigger than a sunflower seed. However, it can be used as a space-within-a-space. No matter what size it is, it can contain things, thus taking them out of the picture, and it can also emit things, thus adding things to the picture. It's the first tool; it's the first thing in the sequence that can be used to change other things.

In step 5, the water flowing through the enclosed space breaches the limits of the space. Like the box, things can come in and go out of the picture on it. It can also be used by the writer to change what is going on in the space—to flood it, to wash it away, to erode it, etc. Also it brings movement into the picture.

In step 6, adding the animal brings in another consciousness—a real strangeness. Putting a human and an animal consciousness together in the same circumstances immediately establishes a relationship that a writer is not likely to have many clichés for.

In step 7, the window re-establishes the enclosed space, and places it in relation to what is outside it. The view through that window evokes again the human being from step 1 who is doing the viewing.

In this exercise, the circumstances that are put into opposition with each other are:

- in step 2, human scale/tree scale
- in step 3, inside/outside (enclosure/tree)
- in step 4, within/within (concentric)
- in step 5, enclosed/broken into, breached
- in step 6, human/nonhuman consciousness
- in step 7, near/far; inside/outside

It's important to make a commitment to each set of circumstances while they are in force. (Unless that set of

circumstances is thoroughly sensed and explored by the writer, the transition to the next set of circumstances won't be experienced by the reader.) Then, when you want change to happen, make it strong and distinct so that the reader can be jolted or uplifted or swept away. The pleasure of the reader comes from the sense of transformation from one set of circumstances to another.

We can recognize this storytelling strategy in the book of Jonah, in the Bible. The first sixteen verses tell a realistic story of a man who, for certain reasons, finds himself on a ship in a storm, is blamed by superstitious sailors for causing the storm, and is thrown overboard. But the seventeenth verse also throws the reader—into a different logical universe: "Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah." The new universe collides with the old, and the reader is surprised. This also happens to be a fine example of the Storyteller showing its hand for the first time in the story.

Three different illustrations of this storytelling strategy can be seen in "Rumplestiltskin" by the Brothers Grimm, "The Hermit and the Bear" by I. L. Peretz, and "The Country Doctor" by Franz Kafka.

Here is the opening of "Rumplestiltskin": "There was once a miller who was poor, but he had one beautiful daughter." We have no trouble believing this; everything in that sentence fits in the same reality. But then, see what happens in the next sentence: "It happened one day that he came to speak with the king, and, to give himself consequence, he told him that he had a daughter who could spin gold out of straw."

A miller is speaking with a king? What kind of world are we in? A dangerous world: but even more dangerous is the boast the miller makes "to give himself consequence." There are consequences indeed. The king takes the boast at face value, and two sentences later the girl's life is at risk.

In "The Hermit and the Bear," we also begin with familiar reality. An ordinary man is dissatisfied with the amount of evil in the world, and decides to separate himself from the world in order to separate himself from evil. First he moves to a synagogue, then to a castle in the wilderness, where a nearby river disturbs his meditations:

> Well—moving the river is a small matter for the hermit. He has a holy spell for that. All it takes is some additional fasting, some deep meditation, and the river moves.
>
> Which puts the river-spirit into a fiery rage....He agitates the river even more, and makes the waves grow huge....
>
> And the wave turns into a bear.

The hermit then tames the bear, which begs to become the hermit's slave. The hermit accepts the bear. Now can the hermit continue his meditations in peace? No, he cannot return to what he was before, and neither can the reader; the transformations and dislocations have been too deep: "A saint who lies down with a bear cannot wake the soul of the world."

This kind of story, which weaves the irrational and the logical together, forces readers to find their own resolutions.

Kafka's "Country Doctor" has the quality of nightmare. This story doesn't move toward the integration of contradictions or a resolution of paradoxes. The more the main character, the doctor, goes along with things, the worse things get. The reader experiences a parallel sense of disintegration. At the end, every vestige of hope of returning to ordinary reality is lost:

> Never shall I reach home at this rate; my flourishing practice is done for; my successor is robbing me, but in vain, for he cannot take my place; in my house the disgusting groom is raging; Rose is his victim; I do not want to think about it anymore. Naked, exposed to the frost of this most unhappy of ages, with an earthly vehicle, unearthly horses, old man that I am, I wander astray.

The first two stories "travel" by forcing the reader to integrate developing circumstances into a narrative that makes sense. The Kafka story travels by asking the reader to keep trying to integrate increasingly disjointed circumstances. These circumstances ultimately prove impossible to resolve. The reader's experience of Kafka's story is one of failure, disintegration, and despair.

All three stories put the reader through a process that parallels the experience of the character. Readers don't read such stories to find out what happened, nor do they read them just once. With each reading, the story becomes richer and more mysterious. The reader goes on a journey, and returns from it changed.

3. What Did Shakespeare See When He Closed His Eyes?

This exercise will demonstrate how much information the eye takes in—and how much more the imagination constructs—when we see something happening. It will also demonstrate how much writing is necessary to begin to give an equivalent amount of information to a reader. The purpose of it is to drum in the idea that it takes a lot of writing to be really sure a reader can see what you are imagining.

For this exercise, choose one of Shakespeare's plays that is familiar to you. (You could choose a familiar play by anyone, but using Shakespeare works well.) Pick a scene you know pretty well, and read it over and over until you feel you have fully imagined what's going on in it.

Imagine how the characters look, what the set looks like, what time of day and year it is, how the characters are feeling physically, what they know about each other, what they are doing together at that moment. Then start writing, using Shakespeare's dialogue, but filling in everything else that you can imagine.

At a performance, the audience receives all of this information visually. This is not true for prose fiction. The only thing a reader knows through his eyes, upon opening a book, is that he is opening a book. There are blocks of words, a sense that maybe the paragraphs are long or short, that the print is clear or smudgy. You have to construct everything else as if you were building something in your reader's head, out of words. In a way, you have the opportunity to make the reader's experience more sensory than it could be at a play or a movie, because at a play or a movie, only the ears and eyes are being stimulated. The smell is always the smell of the theater; as for touch, the audience member probably has his hands in his lap or his pockets, or is holding someone else's hand; his kinesthetic sense is completely constrained because he's restricted to his chair. When you write for a reader, you can awaken and stimulate all of these senses, and you ought to set out to do so. The instructions for this exercise are as follows:

1. One hour. (Yes, this exercise means sitting and writing steadily for a full hour.) Try to write in narrative form what is going on in the scene you have chosen. Get as far as you can in the time allotted. You're going to have to convey to the reader everything that the audience would be able to sense by watching the play. This includes conscious and unconscious knowledge. Don't leave out the dialogue; use it all, but tell everything else that you know is going on as well. It's possible that a whole hour of writing will take you through only one page of dialogue.

2. When you are done, read to someone else what you have written.

This exercise works well if two or more people choose the same scene to describe; then you get to see how differently people imagine the same moments.

The exercise challenges you to use your narrative consciousness so that it can handle complex situations. In Shakespeare's plays, every major character has an inner life. How did you deal with that? Were you able to rise up out of the inner life of one character and drop in on the inner life of another one? Did you bridge the transition gracefully? If you are familiar with the play, you know a lot more about what's going on offstage than what meets the eye. How did your Storyteller handle the enormous amount of information you had to choose from? The choice of options is intriguing. If someone is hiding behind a curtain or inside a box, do you warn your readers about it? If someone is being polite to someone whom he has just betrayed, do you reveal this to your readers? If someone appears who will later become important in the plot but is now insignificant, do you draw attention to her?

This article is excerpted from Helena Worthen and Julian Levy's *Fiction Writing: Exercises and Suggestions*, available for $12.50 plus $2.50 mailing from Corridor Publishing, 21 San Mateo Road, Berkeley, CA 94707.

PLUG

Milestone Video has begun releasing a series of extraordinary old films now on video for the first time. We have seen four of their documentaries. *Grass*, shot in Persia in 1925, followed 50,000 members of the Bakhtiari tribe in its long, dangerous, and incredible migration across raging rivers and over 15,000-foot peaks to bring its herds to pasture. 90 *Degrees South: With Scott in the Antarctic* (1933) is a chronicle of Captain Robert Scott's heroic race for the South Pole. *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas* (Tahiti, 1931) is a beautifully filmed story of two young lovers who break tribal laws. It was made by the legendary filmakers F.W. Murnau and Robert Flaherty. *In the Land of the War Canoes* (Canada, 1914) was made by the photographer Edward S. Curtis. The acting and directing in this tale of love and revenge among the Kwakiutl Indians of Vancouver Island are rudimentary, but certain scenes look so authentic and so "other" that it made our hair stand on end, as if we were magically staring into the deep past. These videos could be used in classes combining writing with history or social studies. For complete listings and prices of all Milestone videos, contact Milestone Video, 275 West 96th St., Suite 28C, New York NY 10025, tel. (212) 865-7449.