

# The Floating Basement

## Reflections on *Story Shop*

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1

**F**IFTEEN YEARS AGO a child made an object that continues to linger in my imagination. It occupies a certain quiet corner of my mind, and though I don't often conjure it directly, it is always present, especially when I'm teaching. Like an image from a dream, it brims with significance, but its meaning remains elusive.

"Would you help me?" I remember the child asked. His name was Ben; he was four. We were standing in the "all purpose room" of the Community Center, amid big metal tables, tricycles, and climbing equipment — things I had to shove aside each week to make room for Story Shop, my fledgling creative arts class. He was holding a big, blue, unopened umbrella that he'd brought from his home. A shy, wide-eyed boy, very quiet. "A loner," his mother told me. Using the umbrella, he pointed to a small climbing house crammed in the back—a dingy white cottage made of heavy plastic, connected to a small, scuffed slide. Would I help him figure out how to attach his umbrella to the roof?

I didn't ask him what his plan was, or point out that this house was off limits; instead, we spent a few friendly moments tying the unopened umbrella up on the roof,

until it stood upright.

When I left to join the other children, and as I glanced over during the hour, I was aware of a great air of industry around him.

My original conception of Story Shop, as I'd described in a dashed-off ad in the newspaper, came as a sudden inspiration, and wasn't all that thought through: it would be a class for 3- and 4-year-olds that would "engage children's imaginations" and help them "create original stories". At the time I was attempting to write a novel, and my own two children were very small. I had some background in teaching writing, but mostly on the college level. In any case, I felt I would instinctively know, more or less, what to do. I figured I would have time to work out details.

But as it happened, the class materialized very quickly: ten kids showed up long before I'd actually figured out how exactly to access all that creativity. I had hoped the children would spend much of the hour sitting on the scrap of magenta rug I'd brought, chatting, drawing, maybe dictating some stories. But this early plan didn't work that well. What was I to do about all the somersaulting, and pinching?

The hour of Ben and his umbrella, as I recall, had already begun to go in a new direction: while the kids were fidgeting, a little girl suggested I put the magenta rug over a table so they could sit under it, and pretend they were baby birds. Suddenly, the class came into focus; an intricate game about baby birds ensued. Weak birds, mean birds, evil cats. It wasn't until the end of the hour, when I climbed under the table with them, and was re-

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telling their stories—“Once there was a big family of baby birds” (a revelation about the role of an adult in the world of children making up first stories)—that Ben came over, waiting politely until we were done, and asked if we would come see what he’d made. Everyone eagerly surfaced out of the rosy humidity, blinking into the light. I remember the kids becoming suddenly quiet, and tip-toeing after him through the maze of big, mute, cold tables. Then, they stood gazing at the little, ordinary, climbing house. It looked, to my eye, no different than it had at the beginning of the hour—the umbrella still shut, upright—but the kids seemed to feel it was astonishing.

Ben took charge. We watched as he ceremoniously opened the umbrella, still somewhat askew, and it shed its blue radiance over the roof. This act alone was regarded with great awe. I sensed that he had something to tell us, but before I formed the question, he explained: “It’s a floating basement.”

“And everyone can try it!”

He threw open the soap-smooth plastic door, and invited each to enter, where they immediately exited on all fours out the back, and then climbed the one step to slip down the slide, a two-foot drop. I scrunched in and out also. No one spoke; a reverential quiet prevailed. The only sound was of sneakers against plastic.

Once everyone had gone though, they asked if they could “try the floating basement” again. Someone begged, “Can we do the floating basement forever?” They looked over at me, and I in turn looked to him: Would he set it up and let us “do the floating basement” each class? “Yes” he said with a little jump, and added, “I love this! I love this!” I remember he took a modest bow.

## 2

Many years have passed, and Story Shop has continued on, gained substance and direction, become a means of livelihood for me. Early on, we moved from the crowded Community Center, into a serene room in an old church where, in the winter, we can see the river through the trees. Hundreds of children have come through, many re-enrolling year after year, making Story Shop a program for older kids as well. The original baby

birds, and Ben—who went on to make other remarkable projects—are grown now, and most of them stayed on in Story Shop for nearly ten years.

Where I originally felt that to be in the realm of childhood creativity was to be at sea—a foggy sea—with no map or compass (and yet where I was supposed to be the guide) gradually, through trial and error, observation, noting the fantasies of kids, what kids make and pretend, and how they tell stories, and especially through knowing children over long periods of time, I have culled a certain way of thinking about and structuring classes. The fact that Story Shop is not affiliated with any school, and doesn’t need to teach formal aspects of writing (although at times that is what we do) or otherwise present finished products for adult assessment, means that I can concentrate instead on supporting kids as they pursue the trajectory of their own notions, however unusual

they might be, in the forms of their choosing. The kind of knowledge I’ve gathered does not compel me to draw up a methodology, or launch a franchise, but is more on the order of how someone might come to understand the trade winds of their own little island.

And while hundreds of children have made fascinating things over the years, and each

project illuminated important landmarks, as it were, the floating basement, perhaps because it was one of the first, pointed out to me a new and important direction that has since influenced my teaching.

So what is it about the floating basement? Why does it stay with me? I offer a few, general observations:

First, of course, I was surprised by its beautiful and clever poetic economy and the way that Ben was able to construct, or reify, an abstract, poetic idea. I didn’t know children could work that way. Although I knew, of course, that children loved to play, and that through play, they could create and enter into alternate worlds, which were often rich with intricate narratives, I hadn’t grasped the aspect that Ben evidenced: that kids could use a distinct component of play—sculpture in his case, for lack of a better term—to express ideas, play with language, and initiate a fantasy.

Chrysanthemums towed  
one fountain, because  
schizophrenic sheep  
telephoned two Klingons,  
and five mats tastes thirsty.

It struck me then that the process of making up stories, or poems, or any narrative expression for young children (perhaps under age seven or so), is dialectically connected with making something else, something concrete, like a building or a drawing or a costume for example; or with the creation of a play episode (“Pretend this is a floating basement!”). In this case, the play episode can be seen almost as if it were a small structure, a demarcated place and time, within which a narrative can safely and richly unfold. Where older children can respond more easily to direct writing prompts, can meet the challenge of the blank page with some equanimity, young children seem more naturally to want to create stories as they interact with objects (as they do with toys) or through imaginative games. Stories for young children emerge as they are mediated through something else.

It is likely that had I asked Ben to elaborate on what he’d made (something I would be more inclined to do these days; at the time I was too stunned to ask): “Tell us the story of the floating basement”; or “Who lives in it?” Or “What can we see as we float on by?” a wealth of material would have emerged. This would have been fun, not only because Ben could have developed and shared ideas, but because we could have adopted his story as part of the lore of our group, and returned to it, say, every week, adding on, taking trips high above the town...

Another thing I took away from observing Ben’s creation was a sense that children not only are inclined to make wildly individual projects, but can devise idiosyncratic methods to engineer their plans. Some kids sit down and write or draw in what is recognizable as a version of an orderly progression; but more common is the child who seeks to execute a creative idea in ways unique to childhood logic. I am thinking here also of a girl who decided to tell a story from the point of view of a cork and spent an hour observing the world while rolling on the floor; of Noah, a child I will describe below, who found a way to write a book about a witch, but began by making things out of cardboard that belonged to her.

Perhaps most importantly, in the floating basement I saw for the first time how art/creative expression can be presented as a kind of gift to a group. Through Ben’s invitation that we come to see what he made, his exclamation

“Everyone can try it!”, and throwing open the little plastic door, he found a way to gain entry into the group, and feel connected. This hearty exchange between children alerted me to the quiet role an adult needed to play in such a situation: I sensed that I shouldn’t call attention to the “product”, as in blathering on about how brilliant it was, or how brilliant he was (although I did feel that way); to do so, I understood, was to run the risk of breaking a spell; a spell had been cast that made all the children part of a group daydream. In there, it was rich and magical, and I needed only to protect it.

And finally: As Ben cried, “I love it! I love it!” I grasped the kind of thorough joy a child can experience by creating something from the depths of imagination, and by offering this creation to others.

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### 3

Since that early hour, I have made it a practice to gather junk for use in Story Shop. All cast-offs. I rarely need to spend money for these things; people donate. I have bins full of beautiful and odd things: Golden candy wrappers; purple netting that pears were packed in; piano innards; coils. Fake sapphires. It is preferable to use things that can no longer be recognized as what they were originally meant to be. This non-specificity allows for projective engagement, and also, perhaps, plays into the fantasy that kids are so partial to: that we are a band unto ourselves, who exist out of time, and who, faced with raw materials, can make everything anew. “I remember rifling through boxes of interesting items looking for the exact right thing and always being sure that it was somewhere in the room,” a teenager wrote to me not long ago about his time in Story Shop.

Children love to build stories, places for stories, tiny worlds — behind shelves, under tables, and especially inside boxes. Sometimes the boxes become chapters: Michael, a seven-year-old boy, organized and painted intricate computer innards, —parts that could spin and had tiny levers—to depict “the world under the sink.” He

told us that within sinks are “carnivals for animals”. “When water comes down the drain, it swirls the levers, and makes the rides go.” Over time he created three boxes in all, each rich with a new aspect of the world, and putting them side by side, he declared that they were now three chapters to a story, which he went on to write, under the title “The Carnival Under the Sink.” One week, another boy in the class brought in his pet frog, who, lowered into the carnival, became a living character in the story.

Some boxes are deep with atmosphere. Ali, age five, filled a shoebox full of paper flowers, an acorn, some golden cloth that seemed to glow, and a tiny green piece of paper that she told me was money. “What’s the story in here?” I asked. She dictated to me:

Once upon a time there was a magic garden.  
And there was a person who looked like an  
acorn. And she found money between the  
biggest flowers.

And she stayed until midnight.

And it was late and the fireworks were booming.  
And the moon was burned.

Finally the girl went to bed. And she took the  
money with her.

Hundreds of story boxes have been made over the years. Interestingly, long after both the story and the boxes are completed, and the project is finished, many kids like to keep their boxes around, sometimes just to peer into. This, even when, as one mother described, “all that’s left in it are globs of glue—everything else fell off.” But still her child kept it by her bed. For that child, and others, the box retains a sort of magical resonance.

I met Noah when he was almost five, and he, like Ben, had big, secret plans, although he wasn’t sure what they were at first. He was in a group with kids who were slightly older than he, and while they were interested in making drawings and dictating stories, he preferred to trawl through our junk bins, spending time daydreaming about things he pulled out. After a week or so he announced that he was going to make “stuff for a witch.” Out of cardboard, wire, and shells, he made many objects, including a tiny wishing well, a laboratory, and a

magic wand. Periodically I asked him if he would like to tell me about the witch to whom this stuff belonged, but he wanted to keep making the little objects instead, and very briefly, when he was done, tell me about them. He did this for about six months. At some point he began to dictate a sentence or two about the object he’d made, or some idea about the witch. He called these sentences “chapters.”

Knowing that some kids particularly like to make things that are big, I suggested to Noah that we tape the “chapters” end to end, to make a scroll. He liked this idea very much, and continued writing and taping for an entire year. Eventually the scroll, if unfurled, stretched across the width of the entire room, approximately 18 feet, ragged and smudgy from being lugged back and forth each week. He was immensely proud of it. At the end of each class, he would announce what chapter he’d just completed, amazed always by his own amplitude. He was shooting for 100—which he calculated he’d be up to “sometime next year”.

Yet the next year, as he approached his seventh birthday, he decided one day that he was ready to write “the real story”. It would be called “The Witch’s House” and at this point settled down to write a long adventure story—on fresh, lined paper— involving a witch named Mona Rina. I noticed that when he was writing the story, he stopped to consult the scroll periodically. What did the scroll have to do with this new story? Apparently, the scroll had served as what amounted to background information. “The scroll is about all the witch’s gadgets,” he told me. “It’s all information. I had to know all this stuff before I could write the stories.”

Here is an excerpt from the scroll. The questions I asked appear in parenthesis:

The witch sleeps in thin air. She sits in thin air too. She drinks people’s blood and eats people’s bones. There’s a key on the table to unlock the secrets that she needs to know. They come out of the crystal ball. There’s a cup that used to be a container that she uses to mix potions. She uses her wand to make the potions. I hang her by a string with a hole in her paper hair.

The witch can review anything in her life if she flicks her wand and a piece of paper appears and it has anything that she wants to remember

on it. There's also pictures on it.

*(What does she remember?)* She can remember when she was in her mother's belly and also she remembers when she was nothing. *(What was it like when she was nothing?)* When she was nothing she could only see her mom's belly. She can't see it in words so she can see it in pictures.

I was reminded of the floating basement and Ben through all of this, mostly for reasons having to do with how both boys worked with such focus and ingenuity, and how both proceeded according to their own lights. Perhaps this sense of their similarities was most keen, however, when Noah jumped up and down when working, and said, "Isn't this so good? I love this so much!" and wanted to share it with the group. It was in seeing his joy for having made something from deep within his imagination and having given it flight, that the other memory was stirred.

#### 4

The pocked, white, plastic house, affixed with the blue umbrella from long ago, shoved in the back of the

room, stays in my mind—sas an intriguing project made by a small boy; as an artistic event that has been instructive to me as a teacher. But sometimes it pops into my mind just as itself; then, it seems to exist apart from conversation, apart from Ben and that particular hour, and have a life of its own. What is a floating basement as itself?

In a basement "darkness prevails both day and night," writes French philosopher Gaston Bachelard; "even when we are carrying a lighted candle, we see shadows dancing on the dark walls." The basement is the dreaming self, unconscious, buried, alone. A basement that floats has come awake; it is free, light, no longer dark with secrets. As the alchemists would say: it is the very image of base matter transformed; as Freud would say, it is the very image of having turned a primitive instinct to stay isolated, in this case—into an act of social generosity. It expresses the transformative power of art. The floating basement is all of this. But in the end, like any fine poetic image, and dream image, its meaning also retains mystery. ☺

#### *Works cited*

Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1958.