

## Library Aloud!

### Storytelling and Reading Aloud Give your School Library a Buzz

by Alec Williams

#### Once upon a time, when the rivers were made of chocolate...

Have I got your attention? Stories are like that, too. They grab and hold attention, they illuminate subjects, they play with language, they celebrate listening – and they're a high-octane way to attract attention to your library too, to motivate children, and to make curriculum links.

Reading aloud – whether stories from memory, extracts from fiction, or poetry – is a subject whose time has come (again!). There's a new interest in speaking: in oratory, following Obama's example; via the BBC's 'The Speaker' programme, and their 'Off by Heart' initiative; and with the Rose Review's fresh emphasis on speaking and listening in Primary Schools.

In a world of texting and social networking sites, young people still need to encounter good speech, and need confidence in doing it themselves, to learn how powerful it is, how it clarifies what words alone can't, how tone and body language can add meaning, and how listening to a good speaker can inspire a whole audience. In later life, they'll need some of these skills themselves.

Reading can seem a quiet and isolating activity. Reader development is challenging this, of course, through reading groups, author events and the like, but speaking aloud challenges the stereotype even more, bringing a buzz to the library!

#### Just listen - and I'll tell you how it was...

Reading aloud is important. Young people need to hear it done often, and done well, to head off the inarticulacy that produces kindalike, sort of, you know... verbal padding, or that reluctant 'teenage grunt', where they're barely able to produce a



sentence at all. Listening skills are important too – students

aren't given enough opportunity for what I call 'guilt-free listening,' where we simply celebrate the act of listening for its own sake, and there's no task hovering at the end of it. The school library needs to be at the heart of this.

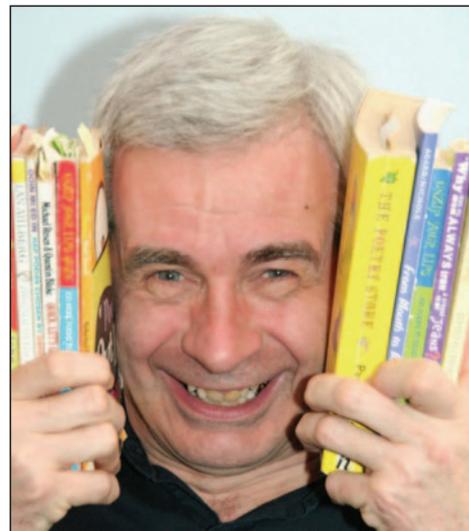
This article includes using traditional stories, from memory, but it's also going to touch briefly on picture books, reading extracts from contemporary fiction, and reading poetry. If there was space, it could go on to include material like riddles, jokes, urban legends, tall tales, myths... there's quite a list!

#### Anyone can do it – even you!

Margaret Read McDonald, Elizabeth Ellis, Connie Regan-Blake, and Barbara Freeman. What have these names got in common? They're all published and practising storytellers, who are also librarians. In the case of the last two, they're school librarians. They're also all from the USA, which was where the modern 'revival' of storytelling happened, and librarians there are much more at the centre of this than in the UK. Let's look forward to more UK names that rival these!

It concerns me that storytelling has 'moved upwards.' It started in the home, with everyone (uncles, grandmothers, children) all listening together – a tradition that still exists in some parts of the world. In the West, it moved into schools, and became something that teachers did, but only to young children. Now, we have a situation where schools 'buy in' a storyteller to do it. But it's far more important than that! Of course it's good to have a visiting storyteller (or else I'd be doing myself out of a job!), for a change of voice, gender or cultural background – and a different repertoire; but children need many more stories than visitors can bring, and it's vital that school staff provide this throughout the year.

The school librarian can lead this move to 'put stories back' – but just for a moment I'll let you off the hook (it won't last!). If you're genuinely fazed and frightened by the notion of telling stories from memory to an audience of thirty or more, then fine... your talent may lie in those one-to-one interactions, helping students and recommending books, and that's vital too. But...if you don't tell stories yourself, the responsibility is on you to find others who'll make it happen: other teachers; students themselves; visiting parents, uncles, grandparents; local celebrities. And if your Headteacher is one of the few



males in the school, he has a particular responsibility to be seen enthusing about stories, as a role model for lads.

## Pictures, Words – or both!

I'm not one of those storytellers who denigrate picture books as 'not proper storytelling': they can be very motivating; they show pictures and words working together; they link more closely with literacy; and provide an opportunity for children to follow up the session by re-reading. There are plenty of great picture book stories that will tell to a wide age range – try *The Two Frogs* (Wormell), *Eat Your Peas* (Gray), or *Wait! I Want to Tell You a Story* (Willans). Use energy and drama to 'lift the story off the page,' and look for any chance of interactivity – choruses, animal noises, prediction, and so on.

On the other hand, the experience of hearing a story told from memory is magical, and any librarian would benefit from two or three stories in their head, that they can tell at short notice. Working from memory gives you greater freedom; allows you to personalise stories for different audiences; to lengthen or shorten stories to fit the time available; to use much more movement and gesture; and to tell to a larger audience who wouldn't be able to see a picture book. It demonstrates to children that you can hold their interest with words alone, and it exercises their imaginations like nothing else.

## 'But I've got five magic beans' said Jack...

If you want to develop your storytelling, here are five ideas. Firstly, find some good sources. These could be in book form; on the internet; stories from family or friends; or from other storytellers.

Secondly, practice... and then practice some more! You could do this at home (to an unsuspecting family!), or with close friends. Tell to yourself too – in front of a mirror, or by recording or videoing yourself.

Thirdly, choose a way of remembering that suits you. Some storytellers' minds work visually, and they might draw a map of how and where the story happens, or a storyboard of the key incidents, to help fix them in their mind. Others prefer words, and will reduce the story to its basic elements – it's sometimes called 'bare-boning' – which they can then use to rebuild the story in their own words. The 'three Rs' of traditional stories (rhyme, rhythm and repetition) will also help you get the structure of the story into your head, along with devices such as choruses, the 'rule of three,' and other features.

Fourthly, listen to other storytellers – either live (at local storytelling clubs, or when you invite them to school); through spoken word CDs; and via on-line clips and podcasts. Pick up ways of telling, how they use their voices, and use (with acknowledgement) any traditional stories they tell.

Finally, contact the Society for Storytelling ([www.sfs.org.uk](http://www.sfs.org.uk)). They offer publications, and will tell you about storytelling clubs and events.

## The door opened, and there in the doorway stood...

Why not invite a storyteller into school – next term, or sooner? Ask your local School Library Service, who should be



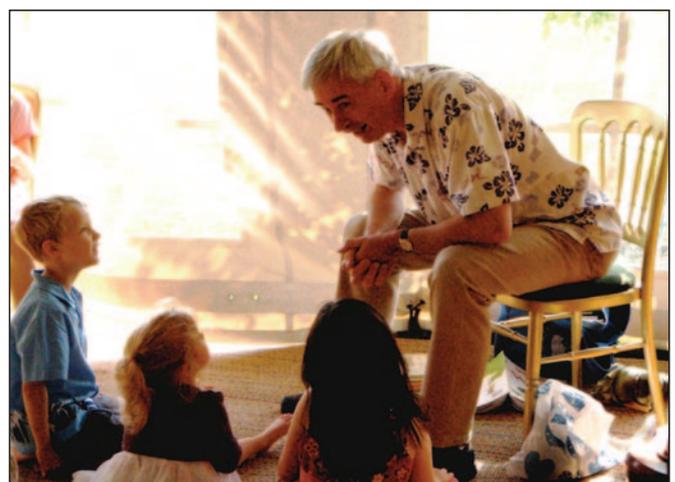
able to recommend people; use the Sfs website above; check with local SLA groups; try regional arts associations; talk to other schools; email school library networks.

If you want the event to have an impact on the library, think through the stock implications. Have you got good enough material in short story sections, in non-fiction places like 398.2 and 292, in collections of riddles, fables, jokes, urban legends? If the storyteller has published material, make sure you acquire it.

Choose the exact venue: the school library itself, if possible! If you need to use a hall or drama studio, make sure you've got a 'library presence' in the form of posters and displays behind the storyteller. Liaise with English and with Drama staff, who may also contribute to funding the visit. Prepare students by giving tasters of stories, and talking about what they expect to happen. Decide at the outset what follow-up you hope for, and how to achieve it.

## 'Very well', said the Hare 'we'll have a contest!'

Spread the load of storytelling, and at the same time motivate students, by getting them to tell stories themselves. You could try a storytelling competition to begin with – invite a storyteller to launch it, telling stories to inspire students and perhaps running a how-to-do-it workshop. Find allies on the school staff – who's keen on stories, willing to try their hand,





and would join with you? Use the competition's buzz to recruit for a storytelling group, which could meet regularly in the library and swap stories.

*'If you want your child to be brilliant, read them fairy tales. If you want your child to be a genius... read them more fairy tales.'*

—Albert Einstein

A storyteller can stimulate the imagination, contributing to Drama, Music and Art, along with poetry and creative writing. Hearing and retelling traditional tales can provide scaffolding for children's own imaginative stories. A storyteller can create excitement and enthusiasm for History, Geography and Religious Studies as well as English and Drama. A storyteller can widen the range of children's emotional, cultural and moral responses; sensitive issues can be considered through

story. Some storytellers have stories which connect with the Maths and Science curriculum, and students can use ICT to produce 'digital stories'. Storytelling encourages a questioning attitude throughout the curriculum, builds confidence and self-esteem. Finally, storytelling builds bridges across and within cultures and communities - some storytellers have been involved in projects linking schools with the wider community.

The cross-curricular impact of reading aloud is not limited to oral re-tellings. Extracts from contemporary or classic fiction, along with appropriate poetry, can enhance every lesson. Taking a 'story approach' to subjects illuminates any topic, and makes it memorable – isn't the first thing you remember about gravity the story of an apple falling? If you want a twelve-page booklist of fiction and poetry across the curriculum, which I compiled recently with the help of school librarians, look at: <http://is.gd/4dZsN->.

Extracts from fiction (perhaps an arresting opening, or a dramatic episode early in the story) can whet the appetite and make the hearer want to find out more. Leaving a story at a cliff-hanging point further increases the desire to read on, and a short story can give the flavour of the collection it came from. Any additional information can heighten the effect – reading the blurb, giving some details about the author, mention of other titles by him or her, and discussion of other books of the same genre or style.

Of course it's true... but it may not have happened!

We all need stories. Is your library a 'story centre' – not just in print but in performance? Make stories happen in your library – and get in touch if I can help you do it!

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