Folktales Aloud



Folktales Aloud

Practical Advice for Playful Storytelling

JANICE M. DEL NEGRO



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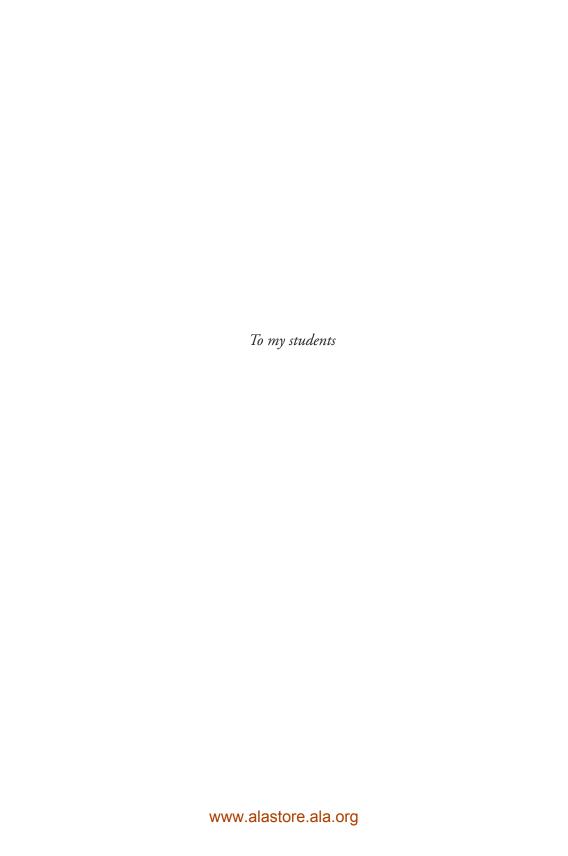
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A NARRATIVE JOURNEY

A Librarian's Tale



I took a storytelling class in graduate library school. Not because I wanted to, but because it was expected that anyone planning on going into youth services in the school or public library would do so. I was terrified. I hated public speaking of any kind and spent most of the semester in a state of stomach-roiling panic.

When I got my first job as a children's librarian at the Chicago Public Library, I was lucky enough to be taken under the wings of two experienced youth services librarians, Dorothy Evans and Grace O'Connor. These wise women helped me navigate the sea of programming that was expected of the successful children's librarian and kept me from drowning in preschool storytimes and other events. My most important lessons, however, came from the children to whom I told stories.

My fear of public speaking did not disappear when I became a professional children's librarian, but I found if I could keep other grown-ups out of preschool storytime, my fears were greatly assuaged. After all, the children (ages 3 to 5 years old) didn't care; they were happy to participate in whatever program I managed to put together. Despite having taken a story-

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telling class, and despite having the advice of other librarians, my early programs with preschoolers tended more toward maintaining control and less toward communicating the joy of story. I believed (because that's what I was told in library school) that preschoolers needed the visual stimulus of the picture book in order to connect to story, and so my programs were locked into a certain standard, albeit successful, way of doing things: an opening song, a picture book, an action rhyme or fingerplay, another picture book, another action rhyme or fingerplay, a final picture book, a closing chant or song. The programs were solid, and they did what they were supposed to do: children loved the books, loved chanting and singing, loved the routine, and as a result checked out lots of books, which made everyone very happy. The circulation numbers were up, the program attendance statistics were high, and parents with children in preschool storytime were reading aloud at home sometimes far in excess of the recommended twenty minutes a day.

I was, however, unsatisfied. The manner of presentation quickly became rote, the presentation of programs a chore instead of a joy. I had attended a number of storytelling festivals, and I knew that a different sort of storytelling was possible, at least with older listeners. Still, there was that edict from library school: preschoolers need the visual stimulus of the picture book.

One day I sat in preschool storytime, twenty-five preschoolers gathered around my feet, as I read, once again, Paul Galdone's *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. By now I had read this story so many times (the children loved it, and who was I to deprive them?) that I knew where the page turns were without even looking. As I told the story, daylight slowly dawned: the children, twenty-five nearly always squiggly preschoolers sitting attentively on the floor, were not looking at the book at all; they were looking at my face as I told the tale. At that moment I did a very dangerous thing; I closed the book, and, as a popular penguin cartoon character once did, I departed from the text. I told the story without the book. Putting the book down meant I could use my hands to more effectively communicate; I could look at each and every child as I told. The complex and sometimes exasperating logistics of holding the book so everyone could see were eliminated; everyone could see without difficulty because now the pictures were in their imaginations. As the story went on the children scooted up toward my chair, until they

were clustered closely around my feet, some even holding on to the hem of my pants. When we got to the end of the story, the cries of "Again! Do it again!" motivated me to do something additionally radical. I decided we would act it out.

An aside is necessary here. Have you ever read books about creative dramatics? I have. The older titles I read seemed determined to make what is essentially a very simple activity into something more complicated than it needs to be. Some of those books on creative dramatics were short on both the creative and the dramatic and long on the concept of controlling the group. Because I had already put aside the idea that preschoolers needed the picture book for visual stimulation, I decided to toss caution to the wind, give up my desire to control the group, and just see what happened. We acted out "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" with three goats and a troll (my chair was the bridge); the remaining preschoolers served as a sort of chorus for the refrains and sound effects. I was the narrator, director, and encourager, chanting the words and maneuvering the action. The energy was palpable, the program joyously rowdy, the children thoroughly engaged in the language and the action. When giving out books at the end of the program—I always give out books at the end of a program—one 4-year-old boy said, "Let's do 'The Three Little Pigs' next week!" "Sure," I said—and promptly forgot about it.

The following week preschool storytime rolled around. I did a newly energized program that included a highly successful participatory version of "The Great Big Enormous Turnip" and prepared to release my charges back into the children's room, when that 4-year-old boy looked at me with big eyes and said, "You promised we'd do 'The Three Little Pigs." There is a special very hot place within another very hot place for a children's librarian who breaks a promise to a 4-year-old, so, despite the fact that storytime was essentially over, I took a deep breath and began. There was only one problem: I did not really know the story of "The Three Little Pigs." Oh, I knew the general gist of the tale, but really, my strongest memory of the story was the Walt Disney movie: it was the only movie we had at my previous library, and we showed it all the time. Having already thrown caution to the wind the previous week, I told my preschoolers that they would have to help,

and we, very seriously, went about the process of assigning parts (why is it that the quietest child always wants to be the villain?) with the unfeatured remaining children getting a choral refrain so everyone was included. I was the narrator—also the doors to the houses of straw, twigs, and bricks. I stood, with the first little pig standing behind me, as the wolf (a very proper little girl with a very proper little bow) pounded on my hands, saying, "Little pig, little pig, let me come in!" Before I could say a word, the first little pig popped out from behind me and said sassily, "Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin!" We were off.

Each time the wolf huffed and puffed, a little pig escaped to the next house, until finally all three little pigs were in the house of bricks. Up on the roof: "He was big, he was bad, he was ugly. He was the big bad wolf, and he was going down the chimney to eat the Three Little Pigs!" There was a collective gasp from the assembled children. "But the third little pig was a smart little pig. She put a big pot of boiling water on the fire, and when the wolf came down the chimney, into the pot he went! She clapped on the lid and the Three Little Pigs had wolf stew for lunch!" Twenty-five preschoolers burst into spontaneous applause. Their mothers, who had been peeking into the storytime room to see what was taking so long, were laughing both at their children's obvious enjoyment and at their dramatic antics. It was a professional epiphany. I had read many articles that talked about how preschoolers learn through play, many articles about the power of story to hold a group and create community, many articles about how folktales were the most effective form of narrative to use with children, but no article, no book, could have taught me what I learned that day from twenty-five preschoolers: the sublime and wonderful joy of playing with story.

Storytelling in the library and school setting can take many forms. For the purposes of this book, storytelling is the oral presentation of narrative to a group of listeners, face-to-face, in real time, without text or props. This book is even more specific in that the narrative being presented is the folk-tale, another term that can have many definitions, depending on whether you are a librarian, folklorist, or sociopolitical activist. Again, for the purposes of this book, traditional folktales are very basically defined as stories once passed on orally from generation to generation, now captured on the

page, waiting to be passed on orally once again. These stories can include fairy tales, myths, legends, and other forms of orally transmitted narrative.

The popular folktale most often has an obvious structure that makes it easy to learn, simple to tell, and enjoyable to hear. Sheila Dailey's excellent book, Putting the World in a Nutshell: The Art of the Formula Tale, discusses the characteristic structure of the basic formula folktale.

The best way to find stories to tell is to explore the folktales already on the shelf in your school or public library. The more familiar you are with the available body of folktales for youth, the more expert and discriminating you will become at selecting stories for telling. Folktales have been an integral part of juvenile library collections since the turn of the twentieth century, and there is a long history of telling folktales to children of all ages in both schools and libraries. The process is a rewarding one that links not only storytellers and listeners but also books and readers.

I teach storytelling at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois. Most, although certainly not all, of my students plan to be youth services librarians in school or public libraries. This book is arranged along the lines of how I teach my class, starting with telling stories to preschoolers and moving toward adults, or, in this book's case, toward middle-schoolers ages 12 to 14 years old. To simplify the organization, this book is divided into the common age groupings often found in school or library storytelling events:

- 3 to 6 years old
- 6 to 9 years old
- 9 to 12 years old
- 12 to 14 years old

Depending on how your listening groups are arranged, you may often find yourself telling to groups organized a bit more broadly, and, in extreme situations, groups that include listeners from 3 to 14 years old. Luckily, developmental stages tend to be more tidal than concrete; that is, development tends to ebb and flow, with overlap occurring at all stages. Every child is an individual; each child is at a different place on the developmental path

on any given day. Although we can't speak to specifics about each unique listener, we can speak to some observed generalities regarding group behavior.

Each chapter in this book builds on the previous chapter, introducing skills in small steps and expanding on them throughout the book. Every pertinent chapter includes very general characteristics of the ages being discussed, but please remember that the overlap among developmental stages is great; your own personal experiences with these various age groups will temper and inform the content of this book.

At the end of each chapter is a StoryCoaching entry, a retold folktale with instructions in italics as to how to most effectively tell the tale. Please remember that the StoryCoaching directions are suggestions, not rules, as every storyteller has his or her own individual style.

One reason we tell stories in classrooms and libraries is to promote the reading of books. Folktales, in single-tale volumes and collections, serve not only as sources for storytelling but also as resources for young readers. Each chapter in this book includes a Tales-to-Text list of suggested books for reading aloud or reading independently. Do not ignore the wealth of possibility already on your library shelves waiting to be shared through storytelling, reading aloud, or independent reading. The range of sophistication among picture book folktales makes some of them suitable for reading aloud to preschoolers and some suitable for reading alone by transitional, selective, and independent readers. The picture book is a format, not a genre; some picture books, such as Scott Cook's The Gingerbread Boy, attract very young listeners, while others, such as James Marshall's Little Red Riding Hood, interest transitional readers, and some, such as K. Y. Craft's Cupid and Psyche, appeal to as wide a range as 12 to 18 years old because of the sophistication of the art and the content.

Collections of folktales are sometimes organized thematically, and, depending on their layout and design, can appeal to sophisticated readers or motivate reluctant ones; consider, for example, Katrin Tchana's collection The Serpent Slayer and Other Stories of Strong Women or Matt Dembicki's graphic book Trickster: Native American Tales, a Graphic Collection. Adults often question the use of the picture book or graphic novel with independent readers; reassure them. The art and vocabulary in many folktale retellings are often sophisticated and challenging. Never underestimate the allure

of effective illustration for the reluctant or selective reader, and never underestimate the complexity of language in distinguished retellings of folktales, myths, and legends. While you are seeking tales to tell yourself, be aware of what you find that might entice the independent reader or the reader-aloud.

Chapters 2 through 5 end with four additional folktales for each specific age group retold specifically for this book. The folktales have been selected for retelling from public domain sources in order to avoid any copyright issues. The retelling of folktales face-to-face within a library or school setting is considered to be fair use under 17 U.S.C. Sect. 107. If the folktales are told as part of classroom instruction, there is additional protection under 17 U.S.C. Sect. 110(1). Shifting from live performance to recorded media (storytelling made available through podcast, video, or other online media) entails reproduction and distribution of copies of the works. In this case if the work is still under copyright, permission is generally needed.

All story and book recommendations have been used successfully with the designated ages and are widely available. For those who wish to investigate storytelling more extensively, many additional references are listed at the end of this book. None of the lists is comprehensive; rather, they include a selection of titles, classic and contemporary, that will guide you toward more in-depth information.

Folktales Aloud is not an academic approach to the history and place of storytelling in libraries; for that, see Greene and Del Negro's Storytelling: Art and Technique. This is not a book about connecting storytelling to pedagogy in the classroom; for that, see Norfolk, Stenson, and Williams's The Storytelling Classroom: Applications across the Curriculum. Folktales Aloud is an invitation to join a centuries-long celebration, where story is the guest of honor.

Welcome to the party.

Recommended Beginning Storytelling Books and Resources Mentioned

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